



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

15 Charter Road Acton, MA 01720

978-264-4700

www.abschools.org

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

February 29, 2024 at 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, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer (left at 8:35 pm), Vikram Parikh, Leela Ramachandran, Yanxin Schmidt (arrived 7:25 pm), Andrew Schwartz, Rebecca Wilson

Members Absent: Lakshmi Kaja

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

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

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

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

Members of the public were invited to watch the meeting online via Acton tv's youtube channel. Adam stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website at actontv.org

This meeting was added to allow more time to discuss the FY25 proposed budgets. The last meeting focused on the "A" budget and this meeting reviewed the "B" budget which would be the proposal if the override is not passed.

a. **Public Participation**

Per School Committee Policy BEDH, members of the public are invited to speak for up to 3 minutes. With the exception of the Budget Presentation (see agenda), public participation will only take place at this time during our meeting.

A citizen commented that once a budget is passed, it needs to be administered throughout the school year. He spoke about turnbacks and E&D and asked people to think about how they would monitor expenses through the year and what role the School Committee should play to help the Superintendent determine what the objectives should be for net use of reserves.

Given that this was not a regular scheduled meeting, the Superintendent's Update would be at the next meeting. Mr. Light reported a significant safety issue at Conant had occurred. Protocols were followed and no weapons were found. The Acton Police and Principal Tricia O'Reilly were thanked for handling the incident so well.

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

a. [Superintendent's Mid-Cycle Goals Update](#) - *Peter Light*

Mr. Light looked forward to talking about all the work being done, in addition to the budget and health insurance issues. Overall some very good progress is being made.

He spoke about the Superintendent's Goals:

- Improve Family & Community Engagement
- Develop High-performing Leadership Teams

and District Goals:

- Improve Social Emotional Learning Outcomes for Students
- Improve Literacy and Mathematics Outcomes through MTSS
- Improve Sense of Belonging/Climate and Culture via Culturally Responsive Practices

Members were reminded that these are the goals they will be evaluating the Superintendent on at the end of the year.

Comments and questions from the Committee included:

- What are teachers saying about Cartwheel Care? It seems like a “monumental improvement” for students. While there is no data from classroom teachers our mental health staff are extraordinarily positive about it..
- What is the impact of the budget on students' experiences for the current year? Because health insurance and special education costs have been a challenge, the budget has been frozen for much of the school year. If staff need something, prior approval is required. People are trying to be frugal and that affects kids.
- How will you evaluate how effective your communication is? How do we know if we're hitting the mark? We are moving toward a screening program, which is part of the A budget. This would allow us to see how kids are progressing and what supports are needed. We have to do better communicating what SEL really is to the public, including the roles of educators vs counselors. An annual survey (Panorama) would be helpful to measure communication success, but other priorities have taken precedence and we do not have the funding to do an appropriate survey. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey captures some of this information. There is also further information in the posted packet regarding measuring success. .
- Do we provide mentorships to new staff? All new staff get a mentor/buddy in their first year. Those without a professional license, continue with a mentor for a second year. We have a robust program, including peer to peer engagement and affinity groups. A survey for staff who have left the district is being finalized to gather input on how we can best support and retain our staff.
- What are we doing to recruit teachers of color? Spring recruiting is just getting started. The District received a \$60,000 DESE grant to expand our recruiting and retention efforts. In person diversity job fairs were done in the past and are beginning to come back. Word of mouth from existing staff is also valuable. It is tough when we are cutting staff to attract new candidates. Financial instability is always a concern for people. Two things that people look at are the culture of a district and the pay. Our salaries are lower. We focus on our culture - treating people well and supporting them in new experiences. This helps retention.

The Superintendent was asked if the thinning of support to Central Office Administration was affecting how much can be done. "How much depth are we losing in these goals as a result? What are some of the things that you couldn't do, but wanted to, this year?" Mr. Light responded that it has been a challenge this year. Although they would like to measure the success of various efforts, there are no data analysts to do surveys & presentations of results. Andrew Shen, in his former role of Director of Special Projects, did some of this work as well as communications but that position has not been replaced. Staff must either do less and measure more, or focus on getting the work done knowing it may not have the depth we would like. He reminded the Committee that the Central Office does the most "public facing" work, and this same effort goes on everywhere in the district by teachers and staff. People are stretched thin. Several members encouraged Mr. Light to be honest about this challenge because from the Public and School Committee view, things are going well. The District is not top heavy in Administration as some might say. Mr. Light stated that the District may be unable to deliver some of the key goals. If we cut the staff that do the work, the work won't get done. The schools can stay afloat but it is not a long term healthy strategy for a district.

b. FY24 Finance Update - *Sheri Matthews*

i. [2nd Quarter FY24 Financial Report](#)

From a revenue standpoint, projected yearend revenue variance is \$419,176, approximately \$64,000 higher than the 1st quarter reporting. This is due to our Charter School Reimbursement Aid being higher than anticipated. Reimbursements and assessments relating to the Charter School program are subject to fluctuation during the school year, as student data is processed. Regarding expenditures, we continue to have a freeze on spending and approve purchases on an as needed basis. As of December 31st, we have spent \$46,207,562 or 43% of our general fund budget. In our revolving accounts, Food Services and Community Ed have healthy balances. As a reminder, we budget to offset the general fund expenses by transferring some expenses to these accounts. \$150,000 of utilities is charged back to Food Services, as is approximately \$80,000 of assistants. \$250,000 of utilities is charged back to Community Ed and for this fiscal year, \$4,896,252 of Circuit Breaker funding will be used to offset out of district tuitions.

Adam noted that in previous years, the district turned back approximately 1% of our budget into E&D. This year it will either be zero, or we will have to withdraw more funds to balance. Mr. Light added that one of the big decisions that Sheri has to make is the balance of turning back money into circuit breaker or E&D. If we do get extraordinary relief regarding circuit breaker, she can offset additional special ed costs and avoid using more E&D. The more flexible reserves are circuit breaker. The Committee's concern is the overall reserve level.

c. FY25 Budget Discussion - *Peter Light*

i. Public Comment & Questions (15 minute maximum)

Mr. Light briefly recapped the "A" budget, which is now the School Committee's budget. The meeting focused on a discussion of the "B" budget, or what would happen if the override fails. The Budget Hearing is on March 7. Important Dates of the two step Override Process:

1. Acton Annual Town Election (Override Ballot Vote) on Tuesday, April 30, 2024

2. Annual Town Meeting Approval in
- Acton - May 6, 2024
 - Boxborough - May 13, 2024

The FY25 A & B Budgets take into account a projected \$9.3M funding gap from level-services (based on available revenues with 3% assessment increase in Acton, limited by Prop. 2 ½).

The A Budget:

- \$3.14M reduction from level-services (preliminary vote by SC)
- 7.55% Increase from FY24
- Proposed Override Budget

The B Budget (for Town Meetings if override fails):

- \$9.3M reduction from level-services
- 1.73% Increase for schools
- Feb 29 Updates:
 - Health Insurance Changes incorporated (\$700K)
 - Includes:
 - 3 Special Education Assistants (positions the administration added back into Superintendent's Recommended A Budget (2/15))
 - District Energy Manager (grants and incentives brought in exceed cost of position)
 - Does not include positions the school committee/superintendent added to A Budget on 2/15:
 - 6 part-time, non-benefited Reading Assistants
 - 1 Library/Media Specialist (instead of FT Assistant)
 - 1 elementary special educator
 - 1 elementary special education assistant

The B Budget breaks strategic direction for most district initiatives: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) & Supports for Mental Health, Student Supports (MTSS), Equity & Belonging Work, Course Leveling, Capital Spending and OPEB Funding (Retiree Health Insurance Trust).

B Budget summary:

- \$9,327,697 Reductions
- \$602,500 New Revenue
- Reduces 86.1 Staff
- Class sizes 2+ beyond guidelines
- Transfers elementary students between schools
- Significant impact on student supports
 - Mental Health, Academic, MTSS
- Significant reliance on fees charged to families

Fee waivers are based on free and reduced lunch as well as discretion if a family asks about a waiver. It is hoped that people are not missed who need this assistance. Information is in the powerschool portal now so it is more accessible to families.

Members discussed class size impacts. Getting outside a reasonable range can have an impact although there is not a lot of negative impact based on research of large class sizes. The pandemic effects are still being seen in some social emotional behaviors. One student who is really struggling can significantly impact a class if support is not in place.

What districts would be our new comparables if we end up with the B budget? Would this shift the public profile of the District? Mr. Light replied that it would affect rankings, because class size is one of the significant metrics of rankings. The DESE site shows that some of our comparable communities have changed due to economic factors. At this point the educational outcome of our students will be the most important effect of the B Budget, not rankings or comparative communities in some members' minds.

The foreign language cuts to the Latin and Chinese programs are significant. The schools would be losing something that is really valuable to our community including from a cultural standpoint. The diverse way we challenge students will be diminished. This speaks to the challenge of reducing class size compared to reducing programs. We have tried not to reduce programs.

Comments from the Public included:

- The home town guarantee can be changed by the School Committee per the Regional Agreement. This could be a problem for Boxborough.
- Helpful to talk about what the reductions represent in terms of the 6% difference between the A and B budgets and percentage of staff reductions. Due to fixed costs the numbers could be higher.
- Losing a vibrant energized staff should be a concern. Has an early buyout been considered for older teachers? Andrew Shen replied that it was considered but the buyout would have to be substantial and we do not have the upfront funding needed.

It was asked if it is always the youngest school staff that are let go when reductions are made. Staffing decisions are dictated by our collective bargaining agreements. Teachers without professional status (after three years) must be let go first. A veteran teacher who is new to the district, would be considered nonprofessional until they get professional status at AB.

Throughout the discussion, members voiced their strong disapproval of the cuts in the B Budget. Adam reminded members that to avoid the B Budget, they must help inform the public about the budgets and the importance of going to the polls in Acton and the Town Meetings.

d. Subcommittee and Member Reports

i. School Committee Communication Goal Update - *Adam Klein*

Boxborough Office Hours have had several participants but not many people have attended the Acton Hours. An effort is being made to have hours that are more convenient for people. A gathering is coming up at the Acton Senior Center with Rebeccah.

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

i. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 2-1-24, 2-15-24

Tori Campbell moved, Leela Ramachandran seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to approve the draft minutes of 2/1/24.

The time of Ben Bloomenthal's arrival to the meeting on 2/15/24 was corrected to 7:40 p.m.

Leela Ramachandran moved, Vikram Parkih seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to approve the draft minutes of 2/15/24 as amended.

ii. Approval of ABRevolution softball boosters \$1,437 donation
Ben Bloomenthal moved, Andrew Schwartz seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to approve the ABRevolution soccer boosters donation.

f. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve 2-29-24 - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*
Rebeccah Wilson moved*, Tori Campbell seconded, and it was unanimously,
VOTED: to approve the warrants as amended (see memo language).

** A friendly amendment was made by Adam Klein regarding warrant #2417 to correct the amount to \$1,964,289.72.*

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

At 9:28 p.m., Ben Bloomenthal moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously

VOTED: that the ABRSC adjourn.

FYI -

[Acton](#) and [Boxborough](#) Election Calendars

NEXT MEETING: March 7 at 7:00 p.m. in the Administration Building Auditorium

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: agenda, agenda item summary pages, Annual District Improvement Plan 2023-2024 Mid Year Update P. Light, Goals Presentation Slides, 2nd Quarter FY24 Financial Reports and Memo and Presentation Slides, S. Matthews, Draft ABRSC meeting minutes of 2/15/24 and 2/1/24 B. Petr, AB Revolution Softball Boosters Donation Letter, Statement of Warrants memo 2/29/24 S. Matthews, Acton and Boxborough Elections Calendars