

**Ipswich School Committee**  
Thursday, March 20, 2025  
MS/HS Ensemble Room  
134 High Street, Ipswich  
7:00 PM

**MINUTES**

**1. Call to Order**

DF called the meeting to order.

Present:           Mat Perry (MP)           Dianna Freehan (DF)  
                  Jenny Connolly (JC)   Kate Eliot (KE)  
                  Sasha Sopic (SS)       Jen Donahue (JD)

Also Present:   Dr. Brian Blake, Superintendent of Schools (BB)  
                  Tom Markham, Director of Finance and Operations (TM)  
                  Edwin (Charlie) Quimby, HS Student Representative (CQ)

**2. Reading of the District Mission Statement**

JD read the mission statement.

**3. Announcements and Special Acknowledgements**

The next School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, April 3rd at 7:00 PM in the MS/HS Ensemble Room.

**4. Public Comments<sup>1</sup>**

DF read the statement on public comment. There were no public comments at this time.

**5. Community Presentations**

**A. Overnight Field Trip Request: New England Robotics Championship**

Middle school teacher Scott Jewell and the captains of the High School Robotics Team provided an update on the team's progress, highlighting their young team dynamic and their accomplishments so far, including being ranked in the top 50 in New England and achieving a higher rank in autonomous categories. Pending the outcome of upcoming competitions, the team expects they will qualify for the championships hosted in Springfield, MA from April 2, 2025 to April 5, 2025 and are therefore, preemptively asking for approval of the overnight field trip for this event. Mr. Jewell reviewed details for the trip including the number of students attending and the accompanying chaperones.

➤ *Motion to approve the High School Robotic Team overnight field trip from Wednesday, April 2, 2025 to Saturday, April 5, 2025 was made by JD and seconded by JC. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

**B. Yellowstone Field Trip Recap/Overnight Field Trip Request**

High School teachers, Jeff Krieger and Lori Lafrance, along with two students who attended the trip, shared an overview of the field trip to Yellowstone that took place from March 1-8, 2025, discussing the students' experiences, including their interactions with 4th graders via Zoom and their research projects. The students appreciated the communal living experience at the lodge and reflected on their learnings about perseverance and creativity, among other Successful Habits of Mind. Mr. Kreiger and Ms. Lafrance their ability to integrate civics and environmental science into the trip. They shared that data collected by students from the trip will be sent to Brown University for research.

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<sup>1</sup> Public comment is not a discussion, debate, or dialogue between individuals and the School Committee. It is an individual's opportunity to express an opinion on issues within the School Committee's authority. While the Committee and/or administrators will not typically respond during Public Comment, the Chair, as presiding officer of the meeting, may choose to if s/he seems it expeditious. Further, should the Chair believe that an issue falls outside the purview of the School Committee, s/he may request that citizens direct it to the appropriate person or body so that the matter is given proper consideration. Public comment is limited to three (3) minutes per person and a total of 15 minutes, overall.

Ms. Lafrance then discussed a request for a similar trip during the upcoming school year, providing logistical details, mentioning the trip will involve 12 students, with a cost of \$2795 covering lodging, food, and guides, while airfare would cost an additional \$700-\$800. She also discussed the submission of a Paine Grant application to cover 50% of the estimated costs and the opportunity for students to earn 3 college credits for \$150 from the University of Montana. When asked about the trip's limited size, Ms. Lafrance explained that the small number ensures an optimal chaperone-to-student ratio. Mr. Krieger confirmed that they had to turn away some applicants due to the program's capacity. The Payne Grant request totaled \$20,000.

- *Motion to support the 2026 overnight field trip to Yellowstone National Park from February 28, 2026 to March 7, 2026 was made by JD and seconded by JC. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

### **C. Vaping Presentation/Discussion**

High School principal Jonathan Mitchell and Middle School principal Peter Ginolfi discussed the growing issue of vaping, emphasizing its rise post-pandemic and its addictive nature, particularly among students. Mr. Mitchell highlighted how vaping has become pervasive due to its discreet nature and easy accessibility, while Mr. Ginolfi mentioned the role of companies in promoting quick addiction through flavored products. They noted that vaping education is part of the health curriculum in middle school and is being introduced at the elementary level with new DESE standards. The team is also working with a Paine grant to purchase vape detectors, which are expensive but effective in detecting vape particles and sending alerts. Mr. Mitchell discussed the challenge of a "no snitching" culture that hampers investigations and stressed the importance of educating students and parents on the dangers of vaping. There was a discussion on how to improve prevention efforts, including expanding health education and possibly increasing parent awareness. The issue of vape detectors in bathrooms was also addressed, with a focus on how to monitor and enforce the rules. Ideas for greater collaboration with police and community involvement were raised, along with the potential for a task force to explore further solutions. Additionally, the group discussed the effectiveness of current disciplinary actions and the possibility of increasing communication across all school levels to address the vaping issue more effectively.

### **D. Citizen Petition: Article 21- Supporting Cost Efficiency in Ipswich School Building Projects**

Community member, Chris Carroll, presented a slideshow on his Citizen's Petition for Town Meeting, otherwise known as Article 20 – Supporting Cost Efficiency in Ipswich School Building Projects. The article emphasized the importance of ensuring that any proposed school building or renovation project in Ipswich fully considers participation in the Massachusetts School Building Authority's (MSBA) Model School program. This program aims to reduce costs for the town. Chris shared a slideshow to provide further details on the proposal.

SS expressed appreciation for the presentation but raised concerns that the article might signal Ipswich's commitment to building two model schools, which could imply unintended costs and considerations. CC clarified that the article was not a commitment to using model schools but an opportunity to review this option. JC emphasized that the goal was to show taxpayers that all options, including cost-saving measures, were thoroughly considered. DF asked about potential cost savings with model schools, and CC shared that anecdotal savings could be around 10%, though MSBA could not quantify this. KE suggested that a commitment to investigate model schools should be clear, but the language in the petition could be adjusted to clarify that it doesn't commit Ipswich to a model school option. After discussion, CC agreed to refine the language at Town Meeting to reassure the community. KE also raised concerns about the article title, suggesting that removing "cost efficiency" might help avoid confusion. The group ultimately agreed that exploring all options transparently was essential, and CC committed to addressing concerns and ensuring the petition reflects the intent to review, not commit to, model schools.

### **E. Strategic Plan: Inputs and Funding**

The discussion focused on finalizing financial projections for the strategic planning report, particularly override costs and the elementary building project. KE, as the liaison to the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC), emphasized the need for confirmation from the School Committee to ensure accuracy in financial modeling. The SPC is looking at spending thresholds rather than specific projects, as these thresholds will guide long-term financial planning.

TM reviewed updated override projections, proposing a model where overrides occur every 2-3 years in smaller increments to maintain financial stability. This approach would provide a buffer in case of override failures, with a first proposed override in spring 2027 for FY29 funding. KE noted that rising healthcare costs and a decreased town allocation for FY26 have impacted financial planning, increasing the projected override need from \$6.9 million to \$9 million within two years. The group acknowledged that this worst-case scenario does not include potential cost-saving measures.

DF and SS expressed concern over the feasibility of multiple overrides in a short timeframe, with SS stating that the community is unlikely to accept this plan. The group discussed the importance of developing a sustainable financial strategy to eventually reduce reliance on overrides. TM emphasized that this model does not aim to eliminate overrides but requires further planning to balance spending.

The SPC needs override figures and school cost estimates for their report, but committee members debated whether they should publish numbers without a clear long-term strategy. Mr. Engel, member of the SPC, stressed that the SPC must provide financial projections to maintain credibility, while SS and others worried about committing to override numbers without fully understanding their impact on the educational plan.

The committee considered three options: (1) delaying the report until fall, (2) publishing the current 3x3 override model, or (3) refining the numbers with the Budget Subcommittee by the following week. KE suggested consulting with Carl Nysten to extend the deadline. The committee ultimately supported the Budget Subcommittee reviewing alternative scenarios before finalizing projections. TM noted that existing financial models could be adjusted, but SS remained concerned about the unknown educational impacts.

The discussion concluded with agreement that a refined financial model should be developed, balancing feasibility and fiscal responsibility while ensuring a clearer long-term strategy to reduce reliance on overrides.

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECT

The discussion continued regarding projected costs for a potential school building project and the estimated cost to be included in the Town's Strategic Plan. It was mentioned that Hamilton-Wenham has been working on a consolidated school project, comparable in size to an Ipswich consolidation, with a projected cost higher than the School Committee's initial cost estimate. BB reviewed Hamilton-Wenham's project, which is estimated at \$142 million. Given that the local project would involve a larger building, BB suggested using \$150 million as a more accurate placeholder. While this number may be slightly high, it provides a safer estimate, especially since costs remain uncertain. The financing plan would involve securing funding in 2030 and 2032, with an expected 40% reimbursement from the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). DF noted that this estimate allows for flexibility when working with the MSBA. Additionally, research on similar projects showed that a comparable school with similar enrollment was approved in December 2023 at a cost of \$119 million. Other smaller school projects were also reviewed for reference.

## TAX IMPLICATIONS/SPENDING TOLERANCES FOR YEAR TO YEAR AND OVER 10 YEARS

The discussion focused on tax implications and spending tolerances over the short and long term. KE explained that rather than recommending specific projects, the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) is shifting its focus to recommending spending thresholds to better manage projects. Initially, the School Committee did not want to weigh in on this exercise, but given the significant impact projects have on the schools, SPC members now feel the School Committee's input is necessary. Individual input is being sought, and members were asked to review a memo from Mr. Engel, which includes updated numbers and tax impact analyses. The last page of the memo contains charts detailing all investments.

Mr. Engel emphasized the importance of understanding community preferences regarding tax increases and spending tolerances. If all proposed projects were funded, the tax impact would be an estimated \$5K per year increase, with 60% allocated to schools. Without input from the School Committee (SC), only two-thirds of available opinions would be represented. Members were asked to consider what they believe is a reasonable and tolerable tax increase both annually and cumulatively. DF requested clarification on the differences between columns in the provided form, which Mr. Engel explained. Members were asked to complete the form and submit it to Mr. Engel by the end of the meeting

➤ *Motion to take a 5 minutes recess was made by JC and seconded by JD. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

## Meeting resumed at 10:26 PM

### 6. Superintendent's Administrative Report

BB reported on:

- The significant work surrounding the budget
- A recent Swampscott building tour, attended by FinCom, principals, and IEA representatives, was considered a positive

experience.

- The most recent Wellness Committee meeting
- Concerns were raised about roof leaks at Doyon, affecting several classrooms. The issue appears to be caused by ice dams, with water seeping under the flashing and across beams rather than a direct roof failure. While all but one classroom are operational, the affected room has layered carpeting that allowed water to seep through to asbestos tile underneath, requiring abatement. The district is working on pricing and has filed an insurance claim, though there is no timeline for completion.
- A meeting with area superintendents to discuss declining enrollment and increased budgetary challenges. BB explained that Georgetown is facing budgetary challenges, and conversations are ongoing about collaboration among North Shore school districts experiencing declining enrollment. The focus is on working together across all grade levels to better meet student needs.

## **7. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports**

*Communication Subcommittee:* In response to topics coming up with the School Committee and the community, there was a suggestion for an open forum outside of public comment. The proposal is to hold the forum 20-30 minutes before School Committee meetings, with 1-2 members available early to engage in conversations with the community if they attend. The recommendation is to try this format twice in April and assess its effectiveness, with the potential to continue. KE supported the idea and emphasized the importance of defining roles for members involved. The focus of these meetings should be on listening and engaging without overpromising. If issues arise, they could be added to the agenda for formal discussion at a later date. The newsletter will be published on March 25th.

*Synthetic Turf Advisory Committee (STAC-2):* Efforts are being made to utilize the extension granted for the use of the Paine Grant funding for the project. The focus is on starting to get utilities installed at the location. By the end of June, a more complete budget estimate will be available, and fundraising will then begin to complete the project.

## **8. High School Student Representative Report**

CQ reported that the issue of vaping remains a significant concern. There is concern over the vaping detectors funded through the Paine grant, as they do not seem to offer an enriching solution. CQ emphasized that the school needs to take stronger action, with a suggestion to implement educational programs in elementary and middle schools, as well as adding teachers and/or substitutes to more closely monitor the halls and bathroom. SS highlighted the importance of changing the culture of students not reporting each other, which may be enabling the problem. CQ raised concerns about the dystopian nature of asking students to report on their peers.

CQ met with the Middle School Council and Student Senate, which was a valuable opportunity to hear from the students. During the meeting, field trips were reviewed, and a concern raised was that lunch is scheduled too early, with students requesting an afternoon snack break. Additionally, students expressed a desire for flexible seating options, as sitting for long periods of time has become challenging. When asked what they loved most about middle school, students mentioned WIN (What I Need) as a highlight.

CQ reached out to the elementary school principals in an attempt to interview members of their student leadership teams, but was met with rejection, as it was deemed outside the role of school committee high school student representative. CQ expressed disappointment, explaining the importance of meeting and engaging with some of the elementary students.

## **9. Finance Report**

No report was presented.

## **10. Presentations**

### **A. School Choice Discussion/Potential Vote**

BB reviewed the School Choice recommendations from administrators for the 2025-2026 school year. JC questioned why the middle and high schools would opt for budget reductions instead of accepting school choice students. BB explained that the schools strongly prefer not to enroll school choice students. BB added that there is no guarantee seats will be filled. KE mentioned that the Budget Subcommittee has discussed School Choice as a revenue stream and how the district is graduating more students than it is adding, warning that without incoming students, the district cannot rely on the School Choice account in the future. DF pointed out that, historically, the district has opened more school choice seats than it has filled.

- *Motion to approve two School Choice seats in grades 1, 3, 4, 5 at the Paul F. Doyon Memorial School and one seat in Grade 2, two seats in Grade 3, three seats in Grade 4, and five seats in Grade 5 at Winthrop for the 2025-2025 school year was made by SS and seconded by JC. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

## **B. Capital Plan Review**

The committee discussed the future costs of modular trailer at Winthrop School, currently included in the Capital Plan, considering the need for budget cuts each year moving forward. DF emphasized the importance of understanding long-term financial impacts. TM outlined the costs: \$240K for the first year, including installation, and \$64K annually for the lease and utilities. SS expressed concerns about incremental spending despite recognizing space needs. KE noted that enrollment was higher in past years but raised concerns about capital and maintenance costs. BB stressed that all available space has already been repurposed for learning, and the need for space will persist as students remain in the building for years. DF highlighted concerns about the broader financial picture. TM clarified that the pricing is based on a five-year lease and that preschool classrooms planned for the modular trailer could be funded through the preschool revolving account. JC questioned whether opening School Choice seats impacts space needs, and JD explained that pull-out space is the main concern. JD also discussed the unpredictability of preschool enrollment. JC suggested a half-day preschool option, but JD noted that a longer day has been more popular. DF asked if there is a plan to offset future costs, and TM responded that it is a near-term expense, not a permanent addition, with some funding potentially coming from the revolving account. MP supported the plan, acknowledging the need and finding reassurance in its temporary nature. DF advised directing any further questions to BB or TM.

## **C. NORESKO Update**

KE provided an update on discussions among town boards and officials regarding the NORESKO project, which will appear on the spring town warrant without the solar carport, reducing the total cost to \$4.7 million. As the School Committee liaison to the Climate Resiliency Committee, KE met with representatives from various town boards to explore funding options to provide clarity at Town Meeting. Three potential funding mechanisms were discussed: (1) borrowing with a debt exclusion, which would impact taxpayers but apply NORESKO cost savings to debt service—though this option received little support due to concerns over debt exclusions in light of the Strategic Plan; (2) using free cash, which would not directly impact taxpayers but would affect other priorities in the five-year capital plan; and (3) a lease option, which would be more expensive and did not generate much enthusiasm. There was also an extensive discussion on whether a ballot vote would be required if borrowing were pursued and whether it was necessary given the changes to the scope of the project.

KE presented key questions to the School Committee, seeking their thoughts on whether a ballot vote should be required for the NORESKO project and their stance on a debt exclusion versus using cash within the budget. The discussion also covered specific projects within NORESKO, particularly the potential removal of the elementary school LED lighting portion. There was concern about the political implications of funding non-essential items for elementary schools. The committee generally supported removing elementary LED lighting from the project.

The School Committee discussed the potential for a ballot vote on the NORESKO project, with SS noting it would be appropriate to put it forth again given its prior failure, while MP felt it would provide a better sense of public support. KE expressed some comfort with funding through the budget without a ballot vote. KE clarified that even if cash-flowed through the budget, borrowing would still be required, with free cash and savings used for repayment. SS pointed out that any option for funding the project affects taxpayers. JD supported a ballot vote, believing the project would pass with clearer details and removed components. MP also supported a ballot vote.

BB raised concerns about the NORESKO project taking priority over the existing Capital Plan. KE noted uncertainty about the impact to the Capital Plan. DF asked whether the ballot question would be written the same way, and KE stated there was a tight turnaround, with wording dependent on the Select Board's final decision at their meeting on Monday night.

KE emphasized the need to clarify the breakdown of school vs. town cost savings, particularly regarding the repayment mechanism. Since schools are major energy users, they may receive 90% of the savings, raising questions about whether they should also cover 90% of the debt repayment. JC asked for clarification that savings would be used to pay off debt service, and KE agreed. KE concluded by stating she would bring this information back to the Select Board.

## **D. Policy Review/Approval**

This agenda item was postponed until the next meeting.

### **11. New Business\***

No new business was presented.

### **12. Consent Agenda**

- *Motion to approve the consent agenda as presented was made by SS and seconded by MP. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

### **13. Adjournment**

- *Motion to adjourn the meeting was made by JC and seconded by MP. **The motion passed unanimously in favor.***

**Meeting adjourned at 11:36 PM**