

Ipswich School Committee

Thursday, March 6, 2025

MS/HS Ensemble Room

134 High Street, Ipswich

7:00 PM

MINUTES

1. Call to Order

DF called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM

Present: Mat Perry (MP) Dianna Freehan (DF)
 Jenny Connolly (JC) Kate Eliot (KE)
 Haley Rist (HR) 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

CQ read the mission statement.

3. Announcements and Special Acknowledgements

- The School Committee will be presenting their FY26 budget to the Finance Committee on March 11th and March 12th.
- The next regularly scheduled School Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, March 20th at 7:00 PM in the MS/HS Ensemble Room.
- The Communications Subcommittee will meet remotely on Thursday, March 13th at 5:00 PM
- The Elementary School Building Project Working Group will meet on Tuesday, March 18th at 5:15 PM.
- The Policy Subcommittee will meet remotely on Tuesday, March 18th at 7:00 PM.

CQ was recognized for his volunteer hours and the Doyon FRIES were acknowledged going above and beyond delivering pre-purchased pizzas to families when their BINGO fundraiser was canceled.

4. Public Comments

DF read the statement on public comment.

Alex Rause, Turkey Shore Road: expressed concern about the elimination of the World Language program. She shared that her daughter enjoyed the lessons and was surprised to see the program cut without more attention from the school district. She was also surprised by the lack of public outcry and hopes there will be a plan to reintegrate World Language into the curriculum, as she believes it's an important opportunity for students.

Jen Dillon, Spring Street: expressed concerns about the cutting of the World Language program. She emphasized the importance of cultural awareness and the value of speaking another language. Her son comes home excited about what he's learning, and she believes it's building his confidence and providing great life skills. She urged the community to voice their concerns about the cut.

5. Subcommittee, Working Group and Liaison Reports

Ipswich Education Foundation (IEF): met on Monday and discussed their fundraising efforts. The IEF is in a good place, continuing to do great work and offer grants. HR inquired if IEF has a specific policy for how grants are approved. MP clarified that IEF has designated "buckets" for specific contributions as well as a general fund, to which people can contribute either to a specific bucket or the general fund.

School Strategic Planning Working Group: met with Carl Nylen, member of the Town's Strategic Planning Committee (SPC). Key takeaways include the need for the budget subcommittee to fine-tune the timing and amount for the next override request, and to provide this information to the SPC. Additionally, the Elementary Building Working Group will review the numbers on a new

school building and timeline for the project.

Town Strategic Planning Committee (SPC): reviewed the investment list and five different scenarios compiled by Jim Engel. The committee also received feedback from the Select Board (SB) and Finance Committee (FinCom) regarding tax limits and impacts, based on a survey. The SPC did not feel comfortable offering recommendations on specific projects. The focus was on identifying financial thresholds that would help manage the town's budget, rather than recommending particular projects. The committee discussed the format of the Town Meeting report, which would outline the financial thresholds and potential outcomes, without recommending specific projects. The SPC emphasized the importance of the School Committee participating in these discussions to ensure that the schools and other areas are not overlooked when establishing budget thresholds. KE will circulate documents outlining the five scenarios at the next meeting, with the goal of gathering feedback. Scenarios B and D were identified as the most intriguing. SS clarified that the SPC's role is to evaluate projects for the next 10-15 years and help manage expectations around taxes. Discussions about spreading out bonds and managing large projects that might cause tax spikes will continue.

Paine Grant Committee: rescheduled their meeting for Monday, March 10th.

Elementary School Building Project Working Group: discussed communications strategies. The project will not begin with MSBA until July, but the group aims to bridge that gap by sharing some information now. The group is working on talking points and FAQs, with the FAQs being more general. The group also plans to update the website to publish all relevant information. SS mentioned that the current forum for dialogue, due to public comment and open meeting laws, isn't ideal, and suggested exploring office hours-style meetings and coffee shop chats. They are looking for ways to better engage with the community and have more meaningful conversations, which will also be discussed at the upcoming communications meeting.

6. High School Student Representative Report

CQ mentioned an upcoming meeting with the Middle School council and student leadership group next week, following DF's suggestions, and a meeting with the HS council on Monday. Vaping continues to be a significant issue, particularly in the bathrooms. There is also a strong desire from parents to provide feedback on athletics. While student-athletes have been filling out surveys each season, parents were not included in that process. Due to recent events, parents have expressed interest in filling out surveys as well. The athletic director and Mr. Mitchell will meet to discuss this. Additionally, there are requests to create an athletic committee to address issues and provide a platform for student voices.

SS mentioned that vaping has been a recurring issue for six months and requested that it be added to the agenda to hear about measures being put in place to address it. JC supported this by emphasizing the need for safe schools and suggested that BB reach out to other superintendents to learn what measures they are taking to combat this issue. CQ explained that during a school council discussion, the process for addressing vaping was reviewed, and it was noted by CQ that in his opinion, the PASS Program has not been effective in deterring students.

HR mentioned that Mr. Mitchell included vaping in the most recent newsletter, and it would be helpful to understand what is happening among students, parents, and administration. KE pointed out that families play an important role in addressing the problem, while MP highlighted that DESE is now treating vaping more like an addiction, acknowledging that the issue is statewide and that administrators may not have the necessary tools to address it. CQ concluded by noting that one bathroom had already been closed due to the issue.

7. Finance Report

The general fund Year-to-Date (YTD) monthly report was discussed. TM shared that the district is in the 9th month of the fiscal year. FY25 is performing as expected, with the general fund in good standing. The district is on track to meet its goals, including the planned expenditure of funds and contributions to the stabilization fund.

TM then reviewed the gift, revolving, and stabilization accounts, noting that all are in good standing. TM brought attention to some accounts, starting with the Food Service account which has seen an increase due to receiving a reimbursement for the free and reduced lunch program. For Circuit Breaker, there has been no change in the balance over the last three months, and charges to this account will not occur until the end of the fiscal year. Additionally, the School Choice account received another state payment for the reimbursement of school choice students.

Tm discussed the change in accounting for Feoffee grants. A new methodology is in place for the TWIG/Paine and Manning Funds, with a total of 53 individual accounting lines now created between the Paine and TWIG grants. Each account line has been

funded with the balance approved by the Paine/Grant committees. TM proposed presenting a monthly Paine/TWIG grant report for better tracking. KE asked if having each funded grant on its own line would complicate the closing process, to which TM acknowledged that it requires more work but provides a cleaner and more accessible system for grant managers. KE clarified that the intent is to close out these lines, to which TM confirmed that this is done every year on June 30.

At a previous meeting, SS had requested historical data on how these accounts have opened and closed, as well as their historical performance. In response, TM reviewed the data going back to FY18 and referred to it as a "snapshot," emphasizing the importance of this overview for understanding the accounts' trends and performance over time.

CQ raised a question regarding the MS/HS parking passes, noting that the account has remained untouched for the past six years. TM explained that their stance on the matter had not changed; fees for parking passes were stopped due to a healthy balance in the account. As with all revolving funds established under state law and bylaws, the funds can only be used for their original purpose, which includes maintenance, striping, and lighting improvements for the parking lots.

8. Presentations

A. FY26 Budget Discussion and Potential Approval

SS referenced the previous meeting, where there was a discussion about accounting for an approximate \$800,000 reduction in funding from the FY26 budget presentation made on February 5th to the budget that was presented at the February 27th meeting. At the end of the meeting on February 27th, the committee asked BB to identify an additional \$300,000 or 5-6 items that could be reduced. Those reductions were to be presented to the Budget Subcommittee ahead of this meeting, however, when the Budget Subcommittee met on Monday, they did not receive clarity on what those additional cuts would look like. Instead, the meeting focused around discussions on alternative ways to allow for a higher return to the Stabilization Fund, keeping in line with the plan to extend the override.

There was a discussion about the role Chapter 70 funding can play in increasing what is transferred into the Stabilization Fund at the end of FY26. . In the fall, the district will receive their Chapter 70 funds. The plan is to anticipate returning an additional \$100,000 at the end of the year from Chapter 70 funding to the Stabilization Fund. The funding the district received will be set aside in case of any unexpected needs, but it is expected to be returned. Additionally, at the end of the year, there will be an extra \$400,000 in the override fund, which would be available for next year's budget. The original request was for reductions, but the response focused on giving back money at the end of the year rather than identifying immediate cuts.

DF asked TM to explain what has happened with the Chapter 70 funds. TM clarified that in the last two years (FY25 and FY24), approximately \$230K was appropriated to the school budget through Town Meeting. However, this amount has been unreliable. For FY25 YTD, the \$231K awarded to the school district was applied to the professional salary reserve line, as contracts had not yet been settled. As the year closes, some of this money will be used to balance salary lines across the board. For FY24, the funds were part of the \$950K brought forward to the stabilization fund. DF confirmed that this year, the plan is for the funds to go back to the stabilization fund.

KE expressed appreciation for the longer runway, which allows for contributing more to the stabilization fund than originally planned, rather than making reductions now in the budget. TM responded that the \$300K request required significant thought, but felt the timeline was too rushed to deliver anything substantial. TM suggested it would be more effective to adjust the budget for FY26 once the school year opens, as they would have more information and a clearer picture of what changes would have the least impact on teaching and learning.

KE emphasized the importance of planning ahead to avoid future overrides and highlighted the balance between looking at next year's budget and long-term goals. The aim is to minimize override requests while ensuring that teaching and learning are not greatly impacted. HR pointed out that this approach should also consider the larger implications of town projects. TM echoed the Town Manager's message, stressing the need to be mindful of both the town's overall financial situation and the schools' needs. JC acknowledged that the idea of putting money back into the stabilization fund may be confusing to some, and KE clarified that the

Chapter 70 funds cannot be immediately moved into the stabilization fund. The funds must first be accepted into the appropriated budget and then voted on by the town to be moved. JC emphasized the importance of explaining this process at Town Meeting.

TM explained that state aid is legislatively designated for specific purposes and is not intended to be moved directly into the stabilization fund. It is meant to supplement operational needs. TM assured that the process for this year would not differ much from the past few years, but the strategic planning for FY27 and FY28 will involve more significant changes. The goal is to request a budget consistent with the town's financial plan, a drawdown from the stabilization fund that aligns with the town's expectations, and a contribution to the stabilization fund similar to previous years.

JD shared her perspective from the last Budget Subcommittee meeting, noting that if there had been six months of prior knowledge about the \$700-800K cuts, the subcommittee would have approached the budget differently. The subcommittee is now focused on larger discussions regarding the delivery of education in Ipswich, including co-teaching, class sizes, administrative models, and curriculum delivery. JD emphasized that these are big decisions the School Committee and administrative team need to begin discussing for next year's budget.

MP agreed with JD's approach, noting that reducing the budget by an additional \$300K in a short time frame would be challenging. KE emphasized the need to be thoughtful in making decisions and to seek input from those working in the schools. Members agreed that these conversations will not be easy, but they are necessary.

KE shared that the Budget Subcommittee recommends supporting the budget as presented, but recognizes the need for larger discussions about the budget moving forward. DF noted the procedural aspect, stating the need to vote on the bottom line and the understanding that funds would be moved to the stabilization fund. TM clarified that the February 27th budget includes the original \$750K reduction, but does not include the additional \$300K reduction.

TM provided a recap of the February 27th budget proposal, which is now the current proposed superintendent's budget. The proposal includes a 2.76% increase over the FY25 budget. A summary of administrative proposals by school, department, or major program was reviewed. The total budget amounts to \$40,949,059, which will be funded in two parts: a town contribution and a request to be drawn from the stabilization fund.

SS and TM discussed year to year comparisons, how they are represented in the budget book and what was included in those comparisons.

SS suggested that certain School Committee line items could be lowered or removed. SS also talked about the positions that were not included in the budget, but would likely come forward as a Paine Grant. SS recommended that the Paine grant positions should not be put forward, citing concerns about short-term thinking and the trade-off of funding those positions versus other needs. DF emphasized that tonight's focus should be on voting for the \$40 million budget, and these discussions about positions and grants can take place later. SS reiterated concerns about the Paine grant positions, suggesting that if those positions move forward, it could jeopardize funding for other items. KE clarified that it is not the School Committee's decision to determine what grants are submitted.

JD expressed concerns about aspects of the budget, particularly regarding the elementary health teacher position. She questioned whether this position, in its first year, needed to be a formal role or if the health standards could be incorporated into the classroom. JD also raised concerns about former positions funded by Feoffee grants, such as computer science teacher and World Language position, which are no longer in use. She was disappointed that two positions are being proposed as Paine grants. While JD acknowledged that principals may be writing grants for World Language enhancements, she found it difficult to accept the budget as it is, feeling disappointed by things that are missing. JD talked about the reliance on Paine grants for positions, noting that while the dance teacher might be an enhancement, she doesn't believe the health teacher should be funded in that way.

The discussion continued with clarification on some specific line items in the budget book and edits that need to be made.

HR expressed frustration with the reduction in the World Language program at the elementary level. She questioned how the School Committee can ensure these standards continue to be met in an intentional way moving forward. DF agreed with HR's concerns. She suggested it would be helpful to have the Director of Teaching and Learning come to a future meeting to discuss how standards are reviewed and addressed. KE acknowledged that no one takes reductions lightly.

The committee took a five minute break.

RETURN FROM BREAK: 9:06 PM

HR inquired whether there is a process to go back to the budget and add back the world language (WL) position, which costs \$72,208. KE clarified that it's possible to propose adding the \$72K to the bottom line, but this does not guarantee the funds would be used for the WL position specifically. HR confirmed it is a current position, not a new one. DF noted that the decision would depend on whether there is another position that the administration feels more strongly about.

SS mentioned the possibility of giving direction to the administrative team on funding being put back into the budget. KE pointed out that adding the position back into the budget would go against the budget subcommittee's decision. DF also noted that it contradicts the administration's recommendations. MP suggested that even if the budget problem is solved, additional pressures on the school day might still arise. SS recommended maintaining the position, but in a limited capacity.

DF questioned the shift from proposing an additional \$300K reduction at the last meeting to now considering an increase. SS suggested that a deeper cut could be made next year. KE noted that this proposal has not been discussed or vetted by the budget subcommittee.

There was further discussion about the override calculator and potential implications of adding the position. SS asked how people felt about adding the position, which would cost \$93,870, including benefits. JD suggested that if the position stayed as is, the cost would be \$37,604 per budget line, with a total of \$75,096 for the two schools. TM clarified that the cost of the position is not reflected in the book, with each salaried position costing \$37,548, totaling \$75,096 for both schools. MP felt that this was not the right moment or venue for making changes, as the group is allocating resources over which they have no control. He emphasized that the current budget is the best possible outcome given the circumstances.

KE agreed with MP's sentiment, expressing concern about adding the World Language position back into the budget. While supportive of World Language at the elementary school level, KE noted that it was not included in the superintendent's budget, and the admin did not support its addition. She emphasized the importance of finding ways to incorporate cultural awareness without adding a dedicated position, given the financial situation and sustainability concerns.

MP highlighted the importance of meeting health standards for compliance. HR asked whether the district understood the compliance requirements and questioned what would happen if the district was found not in compliance. TM added that the admin team was brainstorming ways to incorporate World Language at the elementary schools into the school week without hiring a new teacher, but this was not part of the original budget proposal.

SS acknowledged the concerns raised and agreed that the conversation was necessary. MP pointed out the need to continue pushing for World Language integration into the classroom, even without a dedicated teacher. KE suggested that World Language in the elementary schools could/should be part of larger conversations about Ipswich's educational priorities.

JD expressed concerns that cutting World Language now would make it harder to reintroduce later, and suggested a small increase to the budget to restore some funding. MP cautioned that the committee could not direct the administrative team on what to include. KE asked how the budget would be adjusted to include the additional cost, and TM explained that the only options were either increasing the withdrawal from the school stabilization fund or relying on School Choice funds.

JC added that while the committee could not add the position back this year, it could continue conversations with the admin to see if there was a way to prioritize World Language at the elementary schools for future budget cycles.

- *Motion to approve the Superintendent's Budget Proposal for FY26 as presented on February 27, 2025 for a total budget of \$40,949,059 including the withdrawal of \$1,722,190 from the Education Stabilization Fund and a supplemental request to access \$100,000 from the Special Education Stabilization Fund, as needed, for extraordinary special education service costs was made by KE and seconded by MP. **The motion passed with 6 in support and 1 in opposition.***

9. New Business*

No new business was presented.

10. Consent Agenda

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

11. Adjournment

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

Meeting adjourned at 9:38 PM