



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

15 Charter Road Acton, MA 01720

978-264-4700

www.abschools.org

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

October 19, 2023 Open Meeting 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, Leela Ramachandran, Yanxin Schmidt, Andrew Schwartz, Rebecca Wilson

Members Absent: Lakshmi Kaja, Vikram Parikh

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.

Members of the public who wished to watch the meeting online were invited to use Acton tv's youtube channel (found at the top of the agenda). Adam stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website at actontv.org.

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

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

The new Student Reps for the year were welcomed. Adam noted that their participation is per ABRSC policy JIB - Student Involvement In Decision-Making. Several students spoke. Comments included the concern regarding a lack of ramps in the High School that make it difficult to get upstairs in the west wing for people who cannot use stairs. A student is having difficulty getting a disabled parking pass. There is interest in having a women's study class. A student felt that there was a lack of transparency between students and teachers regarding materials being used in some courses. There are a lot of assessments happening right now because it is the end of the term, and that is causing stress to students.

b. Public Participation

John Petersen attended Monday's Acton Leadership Group (ALG) meeting and noted that it will obviously be a painful budget year. The Minuteman Tech (MMT) assessment (operations and debt service) increase will take a large percentage of Acton's property tax revenue increase for next year. He suggested the School Committee take three approaches to try to reduce Acton's MMT assessment. 1. Lobby for additional state funding for MMT. MMT's per pupil expense is nearly double ABRHS' per pupil expense. 2. Include MMT on a future ABRSC Budget agenda and invite Pam Norse (Acton's rep to MMT) and MMT administration to participate in the discussion regarding the

importance of reducing MMT costs. 3. Continue to work to make the regular education program at ABRHS as attractive as possible to our students to reduce the number of them moving outside of the district.

c. Superintendent's Update - *Peter Light*

The Superintendent reported on: Walk Against Hate, Migrant Shelter Update, National Principals Month, School Committee School Tours, Boston Globe article featuring ABRHS senior, Cartwheel Care Webinar- Raising Healthy Kids in a Digital World, State 911 Department Update, and the Community Coffee with Superintendent and School Committee Chairperson. Updates are emailed to families and posted on the website.

3. **GUESTS & PRESENTATIONS (7:30)**

a. [High School Course Leveling Update](#) - *Joanie Dean*

ABRHS Principal Joanie Dean thanked the teachers for their hard work this year on Course Leveling. She encouraged everyone to look at the [website](#) recently created to provide historical and current work, as well as future plans to provide an equitable course leveling system that supports all learners. The presentation made to the School Committee last April is included. The School Committee will be given recommendations from the Superintendent at their next meeting, and then asked to vote on decisions about a month later.

High School Teachers Amanda Bromberg (Math), Karin Drowne (Social Studies), and Kerri Chartier (Science) shared their experiences in the classroom and opinions about the proposed leveling changes. Some of their students who were having issues seeing themselves as learners or achievers ended up having wonderful experiences when they were combined with students of various abilities. Teaching starts with building relationships. As students trust a teacher, they are able to do more. Teachers try to create a growth mindset. It is really important to have class sizes that support heterogeneous classrooms. Time is also needed to create new curriculum and planning.

Goals for reducing levels are:

1. Students will have increased access, opportunities and choice to study advanced level coursework.
2. Students will have access to a broader range of learning and social interactions that will better prepare them for today's world.

There is a proposal to phase these changes in over the next three years in different subjects, although it began several years ago at ABRHS in several classes.

Questions and comments from the Committee included:

- Have you seen segregation of students? After School Committee feedback last April, staff reached out and received a lot of student input. They have not seen students unable to get into AP classes now. Regarding worries about greater separation or segregation, especially in 9th grade, the plan is not to do this all at once so they can observe how it's going. Having a variety of students in a class

expands what is discussed. Student surveys report they are appropriately challenged in courses.

- Is more staff needed? The first few years that curriculum is being developed, more time is often needed, more than staff. Teachers come with different skill sets. Training co-teachers in their content area takes time.
- Is there an ideal class size number that reaches all students in this type of class? This depends what the students in the group need. Class size alone can be misleading. Ms. Dean stated that she wouldn't want to ask teachers to go to class sizes any larger than they are now.
- How helpful are mentors in the classrooms? Very. It would be very beneficial to have two mentors in each class because they support each other. She'd like more training for the mentors before they enter the classroom. Older students are really proud when asked to be a mentor. Everyone wins.
- What questions do you wish people would ask you (Amanda, Karin, Kerri) about the course leveling? Ask me about what's going right. The goal is to get every student to their full potential. To know someone values your inherent potential is amazing and empowering. Teachers wish people would know this. Another teacher would like to be asked, how are they going to challenge each student? She shared a story about one of her students who was frustrated with how she graded a paper. When she told him to turn in work that was up to his potential, it was frustrating at first, but then very motivating to him and he ended up being grateful. This was not more work, but higher order thinking. Another teacher wanted people to know that these changes will take time.
- What do you need to meet the needs of kids who struggle? More time to connect with special educators, time to collaborate to get a sense of who a student really is. This is particularly valuable if it can be done quickly in the beginning of the school year.

Teachers try to meet each student where they are and then progress that child forward compared to themselves. Sometimes it is about growth and development. A child might be ready for more learning next year if they have a comfortable year this year. More alternative programs are needed for students who don't fit into what we offer and/or that teachers cannot "reach". Places are needed right now for some students "to land", maybe an alternative program, or one of our original leveled classes.

Adam thanked the staff for the excellent presentation. He noted that there will be future presentations with very difficult budget discussions and the Committee needs to be responsive to what they have learned over the past few months. The challenge will be how to blend the great work going on and the serious budget track coming up.

- b. [Planning for Acton Designation as an Emergency Migrant Shelter](#) - *Peter Light*
Acton was recently designated as an emergency migrant shelter. We expect to welcome some new students during the first two weeks of November. Merriam, RJ Grey, and the High School are planning to receive students and leaders from across

the District are planning to welcome them and their families. Mr. Light noted that we have an amazing community that has 30 years of experience welcoming new families from all around the world and he appreciates the strong position we are in to welcome these students. The shelter has been assigned a provider which will be very helpful. We are also recruiting to hire several new staff members to assist with the students'/families' school language needs. The Superintendent was glad that the District has some lead time to prepare.

4. **ONGOING BUSINESS**

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

This item was moved to the next meeting due to time.

b. Subcommittee and Member Reports

i. Health Insurance Trust (HIT) - *Andrew Schwartz*

Steve Noone, Chair of HIT and an Acton Fincom member, presented on concerns regarding the current fiscal health of the Trust:

- Reserves (Undesignated Fund Balance) have fallen to zero
- Contribution Rate increases equivalent to 10% annually are not covering cost increases
 - FY23 claims increase was 9.4% versus -5% in FY22
 - Loss on Reinsurance Insurance was \$1 million versus a loss of \$454,000 in FY22 and a profit of \$491,000 in FY21
- Rapid increase in the level of claims/deficits
 - Claims for last 3 months 50% higher than the same period in two prior years
 - Deficits for the first two month of FY24 have totaled \$1.5 million

Steve stressed that the situation “cannot be ignored and could get worse” and the information needs to get out to the public. What is needed is:

- To reestablish Reserves to a minimally acceptable level (10%) we need to increase revenue or decrease costs by \$2.2 Million
- To restore the Trust to a break even basis based on FY23, we need to increase revenue or decrease costs by \$1.7 million
- Without cost reduction the combined impact on rate would be almost 20%
 - \$2.9 million increase in contributions required from the Town and School District
 - Employees would see an increase of almost 20%
 - Individuals \$50 per month more
 - Families \$118 per month more
- Based on the last 3 months experience that may not be enough.

Mr. Light added that the status of the Trust is one of the financial challenges that will have to be dealt with. Another is that there are 28 additional new enrollees this year than were budgeted for (at about \$20,000 per person). This is an issue for the current year, as well as being carried forward to next year.

- ii. School Resource Officer (SRO) Subcomm - *Rebecca Wilson, Oct 10*
Members discussed the results of the survey sent out last spring to families, staff, and students, and evaluated the perception of the SRO program by the respondents. Recognizing the overall positive perception of the program, we must take seriously the response from historically marginalized communities which was not in line with those of the broader population. Possibilities were discussed regarding the future of the program, recognizing that we are in a difficult budget cycle this year and are conscious of the difficulties in accessing needed resources and supports for the administration. Next meeting is Nov 7 at 6pm in the Admin building to work on finalizing recommendations for the School Committee. See abschools.org for all info.
- iii. Budget Subcommittee - *Rebecca Wilson, Oct 16*
The budget shortfalls facing the district, driven in part by increased costs and the evolving needs of the student body were discussed. It will be a difficult budget cycle. Rebecca stated that the winnowing of the school budget affects everyone, and stifles the very spirit of our community, and that this should raise alarm bells for all. The goal is to solve both the short term budget issues, and look at the long term plan to ensure we have ample room for growth and change as needed. Though the subcommittee wants to be aspirational in their work this year, they feel they are unfortunately in crisis mode. Working closely with ALG, as well as Boxborough leadership, we will get through this together. Next meeting will be on Oct 30 at 3:30pm on zoom.

Mr. Light thanked Sherri Matthews and the staff for bringing the preliminary budget information together so early in the year, so they can discuss FY25 at the next School Committee meeting due to the many upcoming challenges. The revenue coming in now is nowhere close to covering the services we have now for next year. It's important that we begin this difficult discussion early.

- iv. Capital Subcommittee - *Ben Bloomenthal, Oct 11*
Members reviewed the Bureau Veritas Report (Scoring system) with Brendan Hearn and discussed assessing building asset priorities with the principals. This included the Admin building roof and solar projects and how they reviewed the scoring system. Subcommittee members authorized \$20,000 to hire a financial advisory company to help the district with the processes to obtain the maximum financial aid grants and tax rebates for the building work we are eventually going to do. Work on assessing the tennis courts is under way. There will be no more battery storage units installed on any AB campus. Next meeting is Oct 25.

v. Policy Subcommittee - *Liz Fowlks, Oct 17*
The first topic to be addressed will be technology, specifically regarding smart phones and watches. Next meeting is Oct 26 with input from staff on this tech.

- c. Consent Agenda/Action Items - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*
- i. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 10/5/23
 - ii. Approval of ABRPTSO Budget 2023-2024

Ben Bloomenthal moved, Rebeccah Wilson seconded, and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to approve the consent agenda.

- d. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve 10/19/23 - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*

Liz Fowlkes moved, a friendly amendment was made and accepted to correct an item number and the motion was seconded by Ben Bloomenthal and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to approve the warrants (see language in memo).

5. **ADJOURN**

Tori Campbell moved, Ben Bloomenthal seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to adjourn the ABRSC at 9:06 pm.

FYI

- Monthly Student Enrollment, October 2, 2023

NEXT MEETINGS: November 2 and November 16 at ABRSC at 7:00 p.m. in the Administration Building Auditorium

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: agenda, agenda item summary pages, High School Course Leveling Update memo from J. Dean 10/12/23 and Presentation Slides, Migrant Shelter Planning and Status memo from P. Light 10/18/23, Health Insurance Trust (HIT) Presentation Slides from Steve Noone, ABRSC Draft Minutes of 10/5/23 Meeting from B. Petr, ABRPTSO FY24 Budget Overview, Warrant Memo from S. Matthews 10/13/23, Monthly Student Enrollment Oct 2, 2023