

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC)  
Approved Minutes

Auditorium  
ABRSD Administration Building  
15 Charter Road, Acton, MA

December 6, 2018  
7:00 p.m.

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Members Present: Diane Baum, Michael Bo (7:04 p.m.), Mary Brolin, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer (left at 9:30 p.m.), Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, Angie Tso, Eileen Zhang  
Members Absent: none  
Others: Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino

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1. The ABRSC was called to order at 7:00 p.m.
2. **Chairman’s Introduction – Diane Baum**  
Diane Baum welcomed the Committee and members of the public to the Administration Building auditorium. The Committee was trying a new venue to see what other options might be like. The next meeting will be held in the Junior High Library as scheduled.
3. **Public Participation**  
*Per policy BEDH, members of the public may speak for up to 2 minutes on items not included on this agenda. Comments regarding items on the agenda should be made during that part of the meeting. Typically, the Committee/Administration will not respond to comments during public participation.*  
  
A parent from Acton introduced himself as the father of a transgendered child. He was concerned about a few comments made at the last School Committee meeting (11/15/18) regarding transgendered individuals and some of the challenges they face. He emphatically stated that School Committee members need to be aware of and understand the issues that affect our kids, especially transgendered children who are the most vulnerable.  
  
Steve Ballard asked that School Committee members deliberate the issues during meetings, not just validate them. He encouraged them not to just “rubberstamp” the budget.
4. **Student Representatives’ Update**  
Arnav Mehta updated the Committee about what is happening at the High School. Jan 1 is the college deadline. Several powderpuff flag football games were enjoyed recently. Speech and Debate had a tournament at Princeton and AB did very well. Winter sports are starting.
5. **Statement of Warrants & Approval of Minutes– Diane Baum**  
Diane read the warrants and they were circulated for signatures.
  - 5.1. Meeting Minutes of 11/1/18
  - 5.2. Meeting Minutes of 11/15/18Paul Murphy moved, Mary Brolin seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED:** to approve the minutes of both meetings as written.
6. **Superintendent’s Update – Peter Light**

Mr. Light congratulated the ABRHS Quiz Show Team on being named one of 16 finalists. He announced that Larry Dorey is being considered for appointment as the permanent Principal of the High School. He urged everyone to complete the Building Project Survey regarding the proposed sites by Monday at noon.

7. **Presentation: FY20 ABRSD School Calendar** – First Read – *Marie Altieri*

7.1. Calendar Subcommittee Report

7.2. ABRSC Policies:

7.2.1. School Year/School Calendar, File: IC

7.2.2. Acknowledging Religious Holidays, File: ACD and procedures, File: ACD-R

7.2.3. School Ceremonies and Religious Holiday Observances, File: IMD and procedures, File: IMD-R

Diane Baum thanked the Calendar Subcommittee members (Marie Altieri, Brandy Schmirer, Eileen Zhang, Lindsay Rosenman, Lynne Newman, Marga Ingham, Maya Minkin, Michael Csorba, Tessa McKinley) for their work and the public for their input. Marie reported that approximately 1500 parents and 500 staff members responded to the recent survey. A number of emails from the public have been received.

The top priority for parents and staff is to end school earlier in June, according to the survey. With the late end of school last year, there was discussion of reconsidering our vacations, however the recommendation is to keep the current vacations in December, February and April, until a change is made regionally or state-wide. Many AB teachers have children who go to school in other districts and that would be difficult.

Historically, the district has started school before Labor Day when Labor Day is on September 4-7, and after Labor Day when Labor Day is on September 1-3. The teachers' contract says the Friday before Labor Day will be a day off for teachers. The Subcommittee recommends starting school the week before Labor Day next year. Teachers would start Mon, Aug 26 and 27. Students would start Wed, Aug 28. Fri, Aug 30 would be no school. The estimated last day of school would be June 16 (no snow days) to June 23 (up to 5 snow days). The subcommittee wonders if the ABEA would consider having school on the Friday before Labor Day, ending the year one day earlier. They also looked at other districts and FY21.

The Committee focused on what is best for kids, both academically and socially/emotionally. Keeping in mind the Challenge Success focus, members weighed the options, particularly regarding religious holidays. It was asked if mental health days are needed as well. Several advocated for being more inclusive of other religious communities. Although policy requires the Committee to approve the calendar every year, Diane Baum felt it would make sense to have a longer term solution about religious holidays, at least for the next several years. The constraints of being a very diverse community, contractual school days off for staff, requirement of 180 days of instruction, and more, all must be considered while balancing our boundaries and cultural sensitivity. A recent Beacon article highlighted the importance of Diwali to our community and student rep Michael Cheng mentioned it at a previous meeting. Thinking creatively, the subcommittee wondered if having a professional day on Diwali due to the number of families that celebrate that holiday, might be well received.

Ginny Kremer referenced Mr. Lewis' letter advocating for no holidays as no school days. She suggested that this is not an appropriate time to ask to not have the Jewish holidays off with the recent hate crimes. She noted that winter break is organized around Christmas and that seems to be giving Christianity preference.

Angie Tso brought up virtual schools and “blizzard bags” when there are no school days. Districts can submit a plan to make a day count toward the 180 requirement. Marie Altieri said that the AB leadership team is not in favor of blizzard bags.

Maya Minkin’s top concern is wellness and what is best for kids and equity. She talked about the importance of being able to take a day off for religious reasons or mental health. The homework policies must be understood and respected. Kids need time to honor and celebrate with their families and be centered. If it’s 180 days that go late in June, they start the year later, so that argument falls short for her. If the discussion is about the “flow” of learning, with all the interruptions, that is more understandable to her.

Members spoke in favor of keeping the 3 holidays as no school (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Good Friday) at this time. There was some concern about changing that practice abruptly. It was noted that the next school year (FY21) is more difficult logistically.

Mr. Light said that holidays and school calendars are always difficult. Everyone’s holidays and how they celebrate them must be respected. We need to consider equity. He believes that the staff does respect the holidays and teachers do value the students and the wellness work. Teachers are aware of the academic expectations of families and what we see as a conflict if performance slips, teachers are respectful of that, so change can be slow sometimes. Staff wants the flexibility to balance this and to know that the administration and community are supporting them.

Diane Baum heard consensus around starting early and ending early but the holidays was unclear. The subcommittee discussed holidays like Diwali, Lunar New Year and Good Friday saying that they don’t require attendance all day at a place of worship, so maybe those could be half days off. Members felt they did not have enough information about Diwali and Lunar New Year to know how they should be considered.

Adam Klein asked if there will be enough students and staff on those holidays if school is held. Community members could be asked how they feel would be equitable ways to recognize them. It was noted that a higher percentage of families would request Lunar New Year off than any of the Jewish holidays. The district does not want to start questioning why anyone needs a day off. They must be respectful of these requests.

#### Public comments

Members of the public shared their thoughts. Comments included:

- Continue to keep Jewish holidays off and other religions’ if those communities wish. Providing these days off shows children that wellness is important too.
- It is essential to know how each holiday is celebrated. Until all staff understand and the students will not miss anything on a religious holiday off, we need to continue to give them off.
- One of the reasons they moved here 20 years ago was because the Jewish holidays were no school. This tradition has gone on for a long time.
- The school calendar is community based. If 10% of survey respondents want these religious dates off, the district has to represent our community.
- September is an acclimation month. June is not a month where a lot of learning goes on.
- This decision is about what is best for all of the district’s students for 180 school days. You must consider how the holidays are celebrated.

- Rabbi Mike from Congregation Beth Elohim asked what the point of education is and referred to the District's mission and values. It's not about test scores and careers. The AB mission says education is bigger than that and respecting people and building community is important. Giving these religious holidays off says the district cares about people and their vision.
- Mike Balulescu spoke as a Junior High teacher and President of the ABEA, echoing the Superintendent that teachers are 100% in support of students and are sensitive to their wide variety of needs.

The Committee discussed next steps. Given that the FY20 calendar dates work out fairly well, Marie Altieri suggested that the only tough decision may be the start date. Several members felt they did not need more information to vote at the next meeting as planned. The packet has two FY20 calendar versions, one starting before and one starting after Labor Day.

It was agreed that the Calendar Subcommittee would continue to meet and gather information on how some of the religious holidays are celebrated. This could be presented to the Committee in March or April. There would be value in making a decision later about longer term adding more holidays. The subcommittee report was mindful of upcoming negotiations.

There was consensus that there will be no changes in the calendar holidays for next year. It was noted that Lunar New Year and Diwali both fall on weekends next year.

## 8. **Presentation: FY20 Superintendent's Preliminary Budget – Peter Light**

- 8.1. Overview Memo
- 8.2. Budget Guidelines
- 8.3. Budget Requests Linked to District Goals and Budget Guidelines
- 8.4. FY20 Staffing FTE Requests
- 8.5. Presentation Slides
- 8.6. Health Insurance Trust (HIT) Update (*oral*)
- 8.7. Capital Funding Plan (for meeting on 12/13/18)
- 8.8. Frequently Asked Questions

The Superintendent proposed an almost \$91 million budget for the next school year, an increase of 2.69% from FY19. Acton's assessment would increase 2.68% and Boxborough's assessment would increase 2.20%.

Members were happy to see the addition of the certified library/media specialists, replacing the current media assistant positions. As our current staff become certified, they have moved to other districts. It has not been decided yet which schools they will be in. We are one of the few districts that do not have certified library staff in each school.

The health insurance numbers were also well received. The Health Insurance Trust (HIT) has been very well managed and has a sizable reserve. Mary Brolin feels that the trust has been managed too conservatively in the past because there is great fluctuation. The trust requires action to be taken now because of the high reserves.

Members commented that the proposed budget addresses a lot of the needs that they heard from principals and committee members. Less than a 3% increase to both towns is great. In support of the Equity Initiatives, the addition of the wraparound services contract is critical for our students and their families in these serious situations.

The Superintendent thanked Dave Verdolino and Marie Altieri especially along with all of the Central Office administrators and the principals for their hard work on the budget presentation.

9. **School Building Project Update – Mary Brolin**

- 9.1. Overview of Community Forums on Building Site Options 11/27 & 11/29
- 9.2. Building Committee meeting minutes from Nov 14 (next meetings, Dec 12 & 19)
- 9.3. Community Building Sites Survey Flyer – survey closes Monday, Dec 10 at noon  
About 60 people attended each forum. Many people liked the Douglas site, some liked Conant. A survey is open until Monday - 732 responses have been received. The goal for the Building Committee meeting on December 19<sup>th</sup> is the Building Committee's vote on a site.

10. **Student Activities Accounts Review and VOTE of Approval - Dave Verdolino**

Mary Brolin moved, Paul Murphy seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED**: to approve the accompanying lists of proposed student activity funds for Blanchard Memorial School, R.J. Grey Junior High School and Acton-Boxborough Regional High School, each as recommended by the respective building principals, as the officially recognized clubs, teams and other organized student activities for the 2018-2019 school year.

11. **Recommendation to Approve Donation from Littleton Electric Light and Water Department to Blanchard Memorial School – VOTE – Peter Light**

Adam Klein moved, Amy Krishnamurthy seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED**: to approve this donation.

12. **Subcommittee and Member Reports**

- 12.1. Policy – meeting will be on Dec 11 at 4:30 - *Amy Krishnamurthy*
- 12.2. Capital Improvement –meeting on Nov 29 (next one is Dec 12) - *Adam Klein*
- 12.3. Budget –meetings on Nov 20 and Dec 4 discussed the proposed budget – *Amy Krishnamurthy*
- 12.4. Acton Leadership Group (ALG) – *Paul Murphy*
  - 12.4.1. Materials from meeting on Nov 29
  - 12.4.2. Minutes from meetings on Oct 25, Nov 19  
Discussion included an Open Meeting Law complaint and reserves.
- 12.5. Others

13. **FYI**

- 13.1. **Basic Rights in Special Education**, Mon, December 10 at 7:00 p.m. in the RJG Jr High Library, presented by the Federation for Children with Special Needs, sponsored by local Special Education Parent Advisory Councils
- 13.2. **Open Meeting Law Training**, Tue, December 18 at 4:30 p.m. and again at 6:30 p.m. in the Faulkner Hearing Room 204, Acton Town Hall, hosted by the Town of Acton

Mary Brolin moved, Maya Minkin seconded and the ABRSC adjourned at 9:47 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: see agenda