

ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE (ABRSC)  
MEETING APPROVED MINUTES

Administration Building Auditorium

January 13, 2022

Virtual Public Meeting

7:00 p.m.

To view the meeting (no participation): <https://www.youtube.com/actontv1>

To preregister for Public Comment (required by 3:00 p.m. on 1/13/22):

[https://abschools.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_YZBwTZAaRi-JIAA6t8ZOAq](https://abschools.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_YZBwTZAaRi-JIAA6t8ZOAq)

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Members Present: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah, Ben Bloomenthal, Kyra Cook, Ginny Kremer, Adam Klein, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, John Petersen, Andrew Schwartz, Nora Shine

Members Absent: Yebin Wang

Others: Marie Altieri, Deb Bookis, Dawn Bentley, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino

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### **CALL TO ORDER (7:04)**

The ABRSC was called to order at 7:04 p.m. by Chairperson Adam Klein.

Adam announced that the meeting was being conducted via Zoom webinar per Remote Participation policy, BEDJA. The following members were in attendance remotely: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah, Ben Bloomenthal, Kyra Cook, Ginny Kremer, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, John Petersen, Nora Shine, Andrew Schwartz and himself. Yebin Wang was absent.

In an effort to make the meeting as secure as possible, members of the public who wished to comment during the meeting, were asked to register prior to the start of the meeting using the link at the top of the agenda. These procedures are posted with our Public Participation policy BEDH. He also stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website at [actontv.org](http://actontv.org). Per our remote policy, all votes would be done by roll call.

1. Chairperson's Welcome - *Adam Klein*  
Adam asked for people to be patient as members get reacquainted with zoom meetings.
2. ABRHS Student Representatives Update - *Depre Carr, Sivapriya Marimuthu, Rohan Ravindran*  
Covid continues to be a challenge for students. There is less flexibility regarding group work and moving seats around. This is particularly true in World Language classes. The staff "stepped up to the challenge to help bring our cases down" by reminding people about their masks and distancing at lunch. Some students still put their mask below nose, but it is better than it was a month ago.
3. Public Participation  
A parent expressed frustration that the DEI position is being proposed for elimination.

4. Superintendent's Update - *Peter Light*

This update was presented as part of the Covid and Budget agenda items.

## PRESENTATIONS

5. High School Science Course Overview - *David Baumritter*

In January 2020, science teachers created a program review document that identified two primary goals: 1. Create a science sequence with improved access to advanced coursework 2. Create a science sequence that ensures all students take a course in environmental science (one of the most impactful science courses for this generation). This was in response to an examination of course sequence, breadth of offerings and meeting the needs of a changing student population. A significant factor was that some students who took biology in 9<sup>th</sup> grade experienced significant challenges in their 9<sup>th</sup> grade science classes that continued throughout their 4 years of high school science. Feedback on this proposal was collected from many focus groups and it will continue to be solicited, including from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers.

This Science Sequence Proposal relates to the following District Strategy areas:

1.3 Implement instructional, assessment, grading, and course leveling practices aligned with the District's unified vision in order to promote increased cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement for students.

1.5 Expand learning opportunities for all students in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics.

Several members of the Committee were enthusiastic about the proposal and that everyone will take Earth Science. David explained that the plan is to have AP level classes open to all students but the challenge is that the content differs every year. A discussion with the teacher would be important. They want to expose as many students to as many classes as possible, allowing them to stretch academically with an appropriate safety net if needed. A member appreciated the uncoupling of math and science because it provides equity for kids who may not as strong in math but is strong in science. This proposal gives students hope. Another member stressed that critical thinking skills and understanding the design of an experiment are key. He does not have academic training in specific areas that he has worked in, but has been successful due to being able to think critically.

Public Comments included:

- Reducing flexibility and options for people is not good. David responded that we are really working on applications and other skills now because current students have facts at their fingertips. Learning is different now from 10 or 20 years ago.
- 9<sup>th</sup> grade Environmental Earth science will be similar to how 9<sup>th</sup> grade English is currently done. Honors calculus will still be required for honors physics because it uses the calculus math.

- Not every student is inspired by the same subject. Having them all take environmental earth science in 9<sup>th</sup> may not be good. David offered that sometimes by taking something new, students find they enjoy it.
6. COVID Protocols Update - *Peter Light, Joanne Chadwick RN, MSC, Diane Spring BSN, RN, NCSN*

Mr. Light introduced and thanked our two Nurse Leaders stating that they have been instrumental in getting us through this pandemic. They have shown an exceptional level of leadership in responding to the unexpected and helping people understand what they're hearing and how to put it in practice. Dawn Bentley was also thanked for her significant contributions working with the nurses through the pandemic. They all meet weekly for updates.

Because the district has limited time, staff and resources, we have to keep reviewing what is currently effective and what is not. At this time, we plan to shift toward increasing rapid antigen tests of symptomatic individuals. Contact tracing in our schools and pool testing in our elementary schools will end. Everyone should consider themselves to be a close contact of a covid-positive person and take appropriate precautions. The nurses and Mr. Light stressed that students should not come to school sick but if they show up, they will be tested.

#### Questions & Comments:

- The nurses' efforts and dedication were very much appreciated by everyone.
- How do parents decide whether a child has the flu or covid? How will that impact our operations going forward? Flu and covid can coexist. Rapid tests will help to deter which it is. Get the flu vaccine as well as the covid vaccine, "is the mantra".
- Aren't tests in short supply? Nurses have kept on top of testing supplies in the district and they are becoming more available now.
- How will reporting be handled? Our nurses have to enter all of the tests they do and that data is entered into the Board of Health for both towns. All the school nurses also enter it into the state system. The dashboard contains all of the testing being done, including parent responses.
- Will the restrictions for viewing the sporting events be reconsidered soon? This will be evaluated on a month by month basis. It may change during February vacation, we will have to wait and see.
- We've been battling this for 2 years now and it is serious. This is everywhere. What is the protection against asymptomatic kids? We are still masking, MERS filters with high air exchanges in all rooms, open windows, and distancing are some examples. The test and stay program gave us our most accurate view of how the virus may be spreading. We did thousands of tests and ended up with so few positives was remarkable, and evidence that what we're doing is mitigating the virus. Vaccinated symptomatic people tend to spread less virus, whereas those who are asymptomatic, from what Diane Spring read, do not tend to spread as much. The majority of spread is outside of schools – family and social gatherings, or situations where masks are taken off.

- Will the district apply for a waiver of the mask requirement given that household transmissions are most common? With omicron so prevalent, there will be no change with masks for now.

~~a. AB Protocols for Responding to Incidents Involving Hate or Bias – Dawn Bentley~~

Although this was a planned presentation, after returning from break the covid update became more urgent. The protocols will be presented at the next meeting. Evelyn Abayaah-Issah stated that as much as budget is important, it's not to kids. Hate and bias are really important and necessary.

## ONGOING BUSINESS

### 7. Budget - *Peter Light, Dave Verdolino*

#### i. FY23 Preliminary Budget Presentation #1

##### 1. Preliminary Assessment Projection

This preliminary presentation is a "high level overview". The meeting on February 17 will provide the details, and will be the Committee's preliminary FY23 Budget vote. The overall preliminary net position given the proposed budget increases is a \$1,793,066 deficit. Strategies to balance the budget were outlined. The Superintendent concluded by asking for feedback/guidance from the Committee regarding:

- Appropriate level of reserve usage?
- All Day Kindergarten tuition?
- Impact on Communities (Budget/Assessment Targets)?
- Other?

Even with these reductions there is a \$2M gap in the ALG plan with the Town of Acton.

Adam cautioned members that given the tight budget, they should say how they would manage the cuts if they disagree with something being proposed. Would they ask for more money from the Towns? What do we want in the budget, AND how do you want to balance it? Questions/comments from the Committee included:

- We can't back off on our commitment to transition to Universal Kindergarten in the middle of a pandemic when people are struggling with jobs and kids who have suffered. I am also opposed to any cuts to special education programs. Those families are struggling the most as the parents try to work from home with their children who need special education services are also home with them. Case loads are down but disabilities are more significant. I would need a lot more evidence to cut anyone. What is the screener?
- It's pouring right now, use more rainy day reserves to avoid negatively impacting our most vulnerable students and families.
- Several members agreed about not wanting to cut special education staff. One wants to cut more than 15% of regular ed assistants. We are the only district that uses so many regular ed assistants. She would much rather lose \$180,000 in uncertified regular ed assistants and keep the special ed position. Special ed kids are suffering the most. We have some mental health supports that our kids who are struggling can benefit from and they can be

funded using ARPA funds, do we need the screener? Increase training for staff that is available. Don't just screen. We already have kids in crisis and who are avoiding school now, displaying new levels of anxiety. She's ok with using more reserves but also be creative. No reduction to certified staff.

- A parent of a special needs student sees real value in additional special ed staff. Cutting an already thin staff is bad. We've made a commitment to ADK and everyone has been impacted. Those 2 items - ADK and reducing special education staff by 1 FTE, would be harming more students. Health and wellbeing is priority. It is ok to use more reserves.
- Using more reserves is ok, but you cannot solve a recurring revenue problem with one time money. If it's for a year or two, that works, but not for ongoing programs – it's just kicking the can down the road. Regarding strategic importance, MTSS should move forward, and per Evelyn, we need to maintain our commitment to DEI. Although we may lose a position, we should emphasize this (DEI) with new hires. Re declining enrollment at the HS, it's encouraging to see our class size numbers come down and get better, but it is not sustainable. We're going to need to let class sizes get a little bigger. That is the reality required to make this budget work. It is ok to bring this budget to ALG recognizing that there's some work to do. The Acton Selectboard was not prudent in committing the whole \$7M at the beginning of the year, and he feels even more strongly now that the budgets are coming up. This member hopes the Selectboard will revisit the ARPA strategy.
- In agreement with other members, special education services must be maintained. A lot is needed there. DEI is also near and dear to her heart. While she appreciates Peter's strategy, some staff need more anti-bias training. We've made strides and learned a lot and have put some structures in place but these proposed cuts could make things slide back. We need to continue to build on it and do more next year, not reduce our efforts.
- The importance of a DEI focus should be emphasized. It looks like our more vulnerable students/families are going to see the most impact now that times are hard. Budgets are moral documents. As we go forward, we need to tell our community that we are investing in them, especially with our DEI work. Would like to see how we can find \$177,000 to say this is how we are doing DEI work, with a leader. Also wants to be sure our audience is heard. Doesn't want to lose something extraordinary to our mission.
- Another member agreed. He wants to see how to bring back the DEI position, and how the work will be done. He is hearing a lot from the community about this. He doesn't want to go backwards, but wants more progress in this area. Echoes committee members that cuts are not in line with our strategic goals for the district. Are we putting the right money into our known weaknesses? Regarding reserves, he gets nervous about spending them down, if not now in this situation, when? We need to make a strong statement to our community by saying we need to go into our reserves and tell our communities that we need their support.

Comments from members of the Public included:

- Rabbi Mike appreciates the School Committee and Joanie Dean for bringing affinity groups into the High School. He encouraged the Committee to take Joanie's lead. As a community, he feels we are still struggling and as we consider shuffling a budget and positions he asked the Committee to reach out to those involved in the community. He wants a clear transparent procedure so that if someone has an issue with bias or hate, it is clear who to go to – an employee of the district re DEI issues. He does not think that SEED training is “cutting it” regarding anti-Semitism because it wasn't even addressed. Issues of use of the N word must be addressed at the High School. Without a plan to address bias, how will we stop it? Rabbi Mike continues to offer assistance.
- It is very important for school to be a safe environment so kids can learn. This speaker was very disturbed that the Assistant Superintendent for DEI would be eliminated. It is vital for a full time person to be in that role. Discussion of protocols for Hate and Bias should be priority. This move is in the wrong direction. He agreed that special education families are hardest hit and strongly agreed that it is pouring and more rainy day funds should be used.
- A Merriam 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher, asked to keep the social emotional wellbeing of students top priority, and do not cut positions. She stated that they already don't have enough direct support with the established positions.
- Amanda Bailey spoke as the SEPAC chairperson. She asked that when redistributing the Assistant Superintendent's work to please consult the DEI Family Advisory Group for their input. The district added 20 special educators over the past years because “we were so needy”. We wanted certified staff in front of every student. If we have fewer students, but increased needs it means we need more staff.
- Keep funding teachers and special education by pausing the mascot change. When the decision was made, the Superintendent said it would cost \$400,000 and would be gradually implemented. The \$76,000 in this budget for more uniforms could be spent on teachers and special education staff.

## 8. Subcommittee and Member Reports

- Budget - Kyra Cook (12/20, 1/10)*  
Kyra drafted letter for our state and federal legislators requesting help and advocacy with aid allocations. The district has received some aid but not all we could/should. The letters try to spell out the urgency. The state letter went out today. The Committee as a whole agreed to send the federal letter. Kyra appreciated Dave Verdolino's assistance.
- Policy - Nora Shine (12/8, 12/22, 1/11)*  
It is hoped that the new Social Media policy draft will be presented at the next meeting.
- Community Engagement - Andrew Schwartz (12/17)*  
The social media policies as set by other districts and communities were reviewed as well as community engagement use cases. Members discussed defined areas of communication that would separate public communications from private communications, alignment with school district public view policies, record keeping, and Open Meeting Law compliance. Next steps will include defining a workshop to structure

school committee engagement strategy and activation, as well as drafting an outline for the policy committee of our recommendations.

- iv. Capital Improvement – *John Petersen for Yebin Wang (1/11)*  
Yebin Wang chaired the capital subcommittee meeting on 1/11. JD reported that actual capital spending totals \$8.1 million for 33 projects against the bonding planned spend of \$9.5 million. Given projects in progress we are on track with the plan. Since the overall plan calls for \$21 million in spending, we have completed more than one-third of the work. JD has made progress with the online capital presentation, there are still a few issues to address. The capital subcommittee will meet again to discuss the capital proposal for FY23.
- v. Acton Finance Committee – *John Petersen*  
The Acton Finance Committee met Tuesday. Allen Nitschelm and Charlie Kadlec noted that enrollment predictions have been very volatile and, given recent demographics, AB enrollment may continue to decline. They believe that enrollment may reach levels that do not justify the size of current school buildings. They requested that the Finance Committee form a subcommittee to study this issue and report to the Town. The Finance Committee felt that they had no special expertise that would allow them to support a new enrollment projection. The Finance Committee would like a presentation from the schools on enrollment. The Finance Committee does believe that providing oversight of the school space utilization is part of their responsibility. This oversight, along with oversight of District capital can be conducted in the current structure of the Committee. Several committee members spoke to their desire to see an integrated School and Town capital plan.
- vi. Mascot Screening - *Peter Light (12/22)*  
The first meeting was held on 12/22/21 as an orientation and an introduction to the Open Meeting Law. The student group reported that they have developed a community survey that will go out this weekend and aim to solicit a wide range of feedback on the new mascot. Martin Benson said that a number of students wanted to participate on the Committee but felt it wasn't open to all. Mr. Light replied that the students can talk to their principal.

9. Consent Agenda - **VOTE** - Adam Klein

- i. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 12/16/21 (next meeting)
- ii. Approval of Donations Valued over \$1,000 - McCarthy-Towne PTSO

Kyra Cook moved, Amy Krishnamurthy seconded and it was unanimously,

**VOTED by roll call:** to approve the donation valued at over \$1,000 from the McCarthy-Towne PTSO. (YES: Abayaah-Issah, Bloomenthal, Cook, Kremer, Klein, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Schwartz, Shine)

10. Statement of Warrants/Recommendation to Approve – **VOTE** – *Adam Klein*

Kyra Cook moved, John Petersen seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED by roll call**: to approve the warrants (see memo language).  
(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Bloomenthal, Cook, Kremer, Klein, Krishnamurthy,  
McKinley, Petersen, Schwartz, Shine)

**FYI -**

- ABRSD Auditor's Reports, June 30, 2021
- [FY23 ABRSD School Calendar, voted 12/16/21](#)
- Student Enrollment, 1/3/22
- Acton 2022 Annual Town Election Deadlines
- [This Month in the Division of Open Government](#), January 2022
- NEXT Community Coffee: Wednesday, February 9 at 8:30 a.m. via zoom

**ADJOURN**

Kyra Cook moved, Amy Krishnamurthy seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED by roll call**: to adjourn the ABRSC at 10:12 p.m.  
(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Bloomenthal, Cook, Kremer, Klein, Krishnamurthy,  
McKinley, Petersen, Schwartz, Shine)

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: see agenda

**NEXT ABRSC MEETINGS:**

- January 27, February 3 at 7:00 p.m.
- FY23 Detailed Budget Meeting on February 17 at 6:00 p.m.
- FY23 Open Budget Hearing on March 3 at 7:00 p.m.