

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

Virtual Public Meeting

February 3, 2022

To view the meeting (no participation): <https://www.youtube.com/actontv1> 6:30 p.m. Executive Session  
7:00 p.m. Return to Open Meeting

To preregister for Public Comment (required 24 hours prior to start of meeting):

[https://abschools.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_B6qlo\\_3PQb-Af-AV-iDs3A](https://abschools.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_B6qlo_3PQb-Af-AV-iDs3A)

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Members Present: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah (6:42 p.m.), Ben Bloomenthal, Kyra Cook, Ginny Kremer, Adam Klein, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, John Petersen, Andrew Schwartz, Nora Shine, Yebin Wang

Members Absent: none

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

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## CALL TO ORDER

The ABRSC was called to order at 6:35 p.m. by Chairperson Adam Klein.

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

## EXECUTIVE SESSION

Adam stated the need for an Executive Session to be convened under MGL Ch 30A, sec. 21(a) purpose (3): to discuss strategy with respect to litigation because an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the litigating position of the Committee. He said that the Committee would return to Open Meeting at approximately 7:00 p.m.. Kyra Cook made the motion and it was seconded by Amy Krishnamurthy.

The Committee **VOTED by roll call** to unanimously enter the executive session for the reason given. (YES: Bloomenthal, Cook, Kremer, Klein, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Schwartz, Shine, Wang)

## THE COMMITTEE RETURNED TO OPEN MEETING at 7:30 p.m.

- a. Chairperson's Welcome - *Adam Klein*

Adam thanked the public for their patience while they were in executive session.

He stated again 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, Yebin Wang and himself.

In an effort to make the meeting as secure as possible, members of the public could view the meeting using Acton tv's youtube channel. Those who wished to comment during the meeting, were asked to register 24 hours prior to the start of the meeting using the link also found at the top of the agenda. These procedures are posted with our Public Participation policy BEDH. This meeting is being recorded and will be posted on Acton TV's website at actontv.org. Per the remote policy, all votes would be done by roll call.

- b. ABRHS Student Representatives Update –  
Rohan Ravindran wished everyone a Happy Lunar New Year. He said the AB Guest or public wifi has been down since the Fall meaning that personal devices are not usable. This forces students to rely on hotspots or other unusual connections and is an equity issue. Using other devices allows students to learn in different ways that the chromebooks do not permit.
- c. Public Participation  
A member of the public was unable to be heard. He was asked to let the Chair know later in the meeting if he was able to unmute.
- d. Superintendent's Update - *Peter Light*  
We are currently hosting finalists for the Conant and Gates Principals searches. Family forums are this week and feedback from stakeholders is being solicited. The RJGJH Principal search will begin soon. An update on the Douglas Principal search will be given shortly. Our covid numbers have shifted downward which is very good. We will be talking on Monday about covid restrictions changing. We have an over 80% vaccination rate in all of our schools – excellent!

## ONGOING BUSINESS

- e. Budget - *Peter Light, Dave Verdolino*
  - i. FY22 Q2 Financial Update – Dave

There is no significant net change from Q1. Dave projects a year end \$250,000 surplus, although we are only through two quarters. Medicaid reimbursement was a positive surprise due to changes in the rules due to covid. As a result, he reduced the expected earnings to \$49,000 but it is in line with actual interest income. We are being conservative by saying that we think we will break even at year end.

- ii. FY23 Superintendent's Recommended Budget #2A

ALG Update (2/3/22) – *John Petersen & Kyra Cook*

ALG continued the discussion of the \$1.7 million deficit in the ALG plan which incorporates an Acton assessment for FY23 of \$70.5 million, a 4.36% increase. There have been no updates to the revenue estimates. If no additional revenues

are identified, the budgets will need to be modified to reach the net zero which signifies budget consensus between the Select Board, the Finance Committee and the School Committee.

Peter reported that he was in the process of updating the School's use of ARPA funds committed by the Acton Select Board in October. The plan will not use ARPA funds in FY22, they will be applied to FY23 and FY24. The Select Board is open to a discussion of providing some of the unallocated funds to support the District in years beyond FY23.

John advocated for discussing the planned net use of reserves rather than focus on budgetary use of reserves. The desire of the Town and Finance Committee to incorporate the reality that our net use of reserves has historically been wildly different than our budgeted use into our ALG discussions remains low. With the focus on budgeted reserves rather than actual use there is limited ability to close the \$1.7 million gap by increasing budgeted reserves. **There is no consensus in ALG on how to close the \$1.7 million gap and even with additional reserve use, there will need to be significant reductions in the Town and School budgets to balance our revenues with our expenses.** ALG will meet again on 2/18/22, the day after the next School Committee meeting.

#### Superintendent's Recommended Budget Discussion

Mr. Light outlined the discussion: 1. What is the target budget (% increase)? 2. What are decisions on: Elementary Special Education Teacher? DEI Director? ADK Tuition Plan? 3. Which ARPA Plan should be presented to Acton? 4. What additional reserves (E&D, Capital Stabilization), if any, is the SC willing to use? Note: Budget Target – Reserve Usage = Further Reductions Needed.

Three levels of Proposed Reductions were reviewed and members were asked to give direction to the Administration. The District has reduced 14.5 FTE and reduced/adjusted approximately \$1.8M to date for next year. Acton still has a \$1.7M budget deficit (after all school reductions to date). Possible "Add Backs" and ADK are still to be determined. The budget must balance.

#### **Questions and Comments from the Committee:**

- Regarding slides 84 and 85 showing changes in class size numbers from 2015 to present, our average class size went down by 1 but our ranking went from top 20, down to the average. This was good improvement.
- The Committee received many emails. What do we mean by reducing 15% of assistants? These are not special ed assistants, and not at every grade. The public is confused. Mr. Light confirmed that generally it would be the equivalent of one grade level of assistants in each building. In the latest version, we are now proposing the equivalent of two levels.
- We need to provide direction on how to start working out the deficit, not add backs. It's the objective of the School Committee and Administration to serve 5500 students, not just kindergarteners, or any one group. This budget needs to reflect an appropriate distribution.

- We vote a top line budget and the principals and administrators work out the details. It's not appropriate for the Committee to dig into the details. Re ADK, from balancing perspectives, the original reduction is the best we can do, although not what we'd like to do.
- Regarding use of reserves, a member advocated for the net use of reserves, and wants a reserve allocation that will provide the Administration with the flexibility to adjust as needed or take advantage of an opportunity if it came up. We could increase E&D from 1.25 to 1.75, recognizing that Dave would give some back.
- Regarding serving the entirety of the population, a member advocated for the DEI director because he/she serves all, is a preventative measure, and would stop some of our current problems. She doesn't want to sacrifice this or ADK. All 3 of these things would do us extraordinary good, and are essential. We probably could have gotten them if not for covid because we had to make school happen during the pandemic. We are going to lose something now in our three most vulnerable communities. ADK is about closing the literacy gap. Most schools have 6<sup>th</sup> grade in middle school, with no assistants. Several members agreed strongly with these points.
- Reducing what we put into capital, increasing E&D and asking for more ARPA funds is the way to go.
- A member who is a psychologist, said that working with students and parents who have been struggling for 2 ½ years with covid, sets the stage. She advocated for using more E&D, and putting less into savings. Some things might have to happen more slowly. Could we wait a year to put the DEI position in place or slow down on ADK? Heartbreaking choices, but this is a way to get through it. What is the impact on students of slowing down?
- Re ARPA funds, the Administration should go to the Town with all of the things we think are important and ask them to help with what we need that was impacted by Covid. This is a serious equity issue. As long as we give a half day K option, we can't have a Full Day K curriculum.
- Frustration was expressed at the town of Acton for the way ARPA funds were allocated and that they won't help, especially since the District has to pay 2/3 of the deficit. We are struggling to avoid impacts to our most vulnerable groups. The DEI position is non-negotiable and must happen.
- Another member is comfortable adding the DEI position. In terms of these prelim discussions, the number needs to come down. The proposals can survive. ALG process that doesn't net zero, and a SC that brings forth a budget that doesn't have FINcom and BOS support is naïve. Cut in equal amounts that you are proposing, then double down on it. That is what it will take to balance.
- The Schools never stopped providing services during the pandemic, investing in a totally new remote school. The Town needs to recognize what we're trying to do and the vulnerable community we serve.
- We need to do the right thing with the three groups of our most vulnerable kids with needs – babies (ADK), special education, and those dealing with

DEI issues. It's not ok to try to close the gap with our most vulnerable students.

***Comments from the Public:***

- There was agreement regarding the three most disadvantaged groups of children. "Acton needs to get its act together." Go with Option 4 re ADK.
- A member was sympathetic to the opinion that the town isn't allocating funds. The Select Board needs to meet the guidelines. Ask for replacement funds due to covid losses, not to fund new programs.
- Always think "what's best for kids"? Dedicated adults are classroom assistants. Now is not the time to cut them, especially if we need to implement MTSS.
- Mike Balulescu, President of the ABEA urged members to consider any further staff cuts as a last resort. We are already asking staff to do more with less and making cuts.
- A member responded that AB is one of the only districts that staff with so many uncertified staff/assistants. She felt that we should be spending on certified positions, not so much on 12 hours/week positions. She stressed that the discussion was not about special education assistants.

The Superintendent stressed that he needed immediate direction from the School Committee regarding the \$1.7M gap:

- Whether to use additional reserves (E&D and/or Capital Stabilization) and if so, how much?
- Whether to reduce the operating budget or make other cuts

This input needed to be taken back to ALG at the meeting the next morning. The ALG Plan has to reach zero because Acton is at the levy limit with NO capacity to increase. Boxborough is in a different position because they are not at their levy limit and could increase taxes if needed.

Comments from the Committee included:

- Decrease the assessment by \$.5M and then \$1M with or without ADK, then the Committee can decide. This is what we need to do.
- It is time to use more reserves. "Risk big to get something really good." These are "stifling choices". We need to reprioritize and not put our most vulnerable first.
- Bring the Fincom and Select Board a list in good faith and include what we have lost. Hopefully the Town will hear it.
- We need to pay the piper but lovingly. Include DEI, special education, and ADK. If we need more capital, use the rainy day fund.
- Look at reserves, and not restoring as much capital stabilization, make operational cuts if needed. Don't touch services directly affecting our most vulnerable students.

A member of the public who was unable to speak during public participation spoke as an alumni of ABRHS Class of 64. He expressed his deep frustration

that the colonial mascot had been retired and felt it was erasing our traditions. He added that people don't think this was a wise idea.

f. Subcommittee and Member Reports

i. Policy - *Nora Shine*

1. NEW: Social Media, File: IJNDD - First Read

a. Draft procedures, File: IJNDD-R

The subcommittee is looking for feedback before the Second Read. Several members felt the policy was too long and hard to read. Other districts' policies were reviewed, but this is a whole new area to cover. It was suggested that some of the guidelines may be procedural. Sub members were thanked for taking on this challenging new policy.

ii. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 1/13/22 ~~and 1/27/22~~

Kyra Cook moved, Ben Bloomenthal seconded and it was unanimously,

**VOTED by roll call**: to approve the minutes of the meeting on 1/13/22.  
(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Bloomenthal, Cook, Kremer, Klein, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Schwartz, Shine ABSTAINED: Wang)

**FYI**

- Acton 2022 Annual Town Election Deadlines
- Boxborough 2022 Election/Town Meeting Calendar
- Student Enrollment 2/1/22
- NEXT Community Coffee: Wednesday, February 9 at 8:30 a.m. via zoom

**ADJOURN**

Tessa McKinley moved, Ben Bloomenthal seconded and it was unanimously,

**VOTED by roll call**: to adjourn the ABRSC with gratitude at 10:04 p.m.

(YES: Abayaah-Issah, Bloomenthal, Cook, Kremer, Klein, Krishnamurthy, McKinley, Petersen, Schwartz, Shine, Wang)

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used:

03-03-22 Agenda

FY22 Budget Q2 Financial Update – Overview and Revenue by Type, 1/31/22

FY23 Superintendent's Preliminary Budget v.3 slides

ARPA Requests – Full list, 2/4/22

NEW: Social Media Draft Policy, File: IJNDD - First Read

IJNDD-R Draft procedures

ABRSC Meeting Draft Minutes of 1/13/22

**FYI:**

Acton 2022 Annual Town Election Deadlines  
Boxborough 2022 Election/Town Meeting Calendar  
Student Enrollment 2/1/22

**NEXT ABRSC MEETINGS:** FY23 Detailed Budget Meeting on February 17 at 6:00 p.m.  
FY23 Open Budget Hearing on March 3 at 7:00 p.m.