

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR SESSION
OF THE MALDEN SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Monday, March 4, 2024

Herbert L. Jackson Council Chamber Room #106 - 215 Pleasant Street
And Virtual Meeting

Mayor Christenson called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Mayor Christenson read the docket items for the meeting.

Mayor Christenson led the committee in the Pledge of Allegiance followed by a moment of silence for those who have served our country and for those who continue to do so.

Roll Call

The following attendance was taken:

Mayor Christenson	Present
Mr. Drummey	Present
Mr. McCarthy	Present
Ms. Spadafora	Present
Ms. Macklin	Present
Ms. Hortie	Present
Mr. Gray	Present
Mr. Bernard	Present
Ms. Rose-Zeiberg	Present
Superintendent Noriega-Murphy	Present
Student Representative Abel	Absent
Clerk	Present

Mayor Christenson invited Ms. Spadafora to provide details about joining the language access channels for the meeting.

Approval of Minutes

Mayor Christenson brought forth the matter of the adoption of minutes for the February 5th, 2024 Regular Session of the School Committee. Mr. Drummey made the motion to adopt the minutes. Mr. McCarthy seconded and it was so VOTED. Motion passed unanimously.

Public Comment

Mr. Bruce Friedman, 8 Marvin Street, Malden

Mr. Friedman asked if he had two or three minutes for public comment and Mayor Christenson confirmed that it was three minutes. Mr. Friedman said that the School Committee can and must do better. Mr. Friedman said that the Vice-Chair of the School Committee who is also the Chair of the Budget Subcommittee recently reported and projected an \$8 million deficit in a public comment as a private citizen at a City Council meeting. Mr. Friedman asked how was that possible and also questioned why it was reported at a City Council meeting instead of at the School Committee. Mr. Friedman said that the School Committee should stop passing the buck to the state by blaming Chapter 70 funding and

should disclose how money is spent in a complete and audible way. Mr. Friedman said that he personally observed many wasteful expenditures including hiring a private attorney to sue him in order to prevent public records from being released. Mr. Friedman added that the public records could substantiate abuse of a special needs child on a school bus. Mr. Friedman asked how much money was spent on the litigation filed nearly three years ago which is still pending. Mr. Friedman said that the contract with the bus company has been re-renewed the contract despite multiple parent complaints. Mr. Friedman continued that the funds spent for legal and litigation services is neither plainly discussed nor apparent to the citizens or tax payers and that a series of public records requests made by multiple entities has not resolved the question of the amount of money spent on legal fees year over year. Mr. Friedman added that the cost of a bloated administration and middle management for this district has risen dramatically, as more and more hiring as well as pay increases are supported for administrative positions, paying at least one Assistant Superintendent more money than the Superintendent per diem and allowing them to work only four days a week. Mr. Friedman said that this not only sets a bad precedent but defies reason as a new superintendent search begins. Mr. Friedman added that to determine behind closed doors who will sit on the superintendent search committee without notice, authority and measures of transparency required by law, lays bare the inherent distrust that this public body has for the public that elected it. Mr. Friedman added that it is time to behave in a manner consistent with the trust and authority granted to it by the citizens and taxpayers of Malden as well as in a manner consistent with the law of the Commonwealth. Mr. Friedman said that the failure to timely review and approve meeting minutes; produce requested public documents and minutes; regularly review executive session meeting minutes and redactions; as well as address on-going and immediate complaints of open meeting violations is not only shameful but shows long-standing and habitual disregard of sworn duties.

Ms. Rachel LeBlanc, Malden Public Schools (MPS) Staff

Ms. LeBlanc said School Committee meetings are a community forum to inform the public and in turn allow the public to voice concerns in order to better the schools as well as the community as a whole. Ms. LeBlanc continued that it is a place for reasonable criticism and discourse but recent conduct at these meetings does not reflect the stated objective or the spirit of this forum. Ms. LeBlanc said that policies in place to keep meetings on track and working productively are blatantly disregarded. As a result, members of the community are being defamed, falsely accused, and their physical safety is being threatened. Ms. LeBlanc added that this behavior is unacceptable as it degrades the quality of vital discourses the body is tasked to oversee, making it less likely for legitimate criticisms to be offered for fear of retaliation and it is entirely out of order as well as scope for this assembly. Individual citizens, school staff especially should never expect to be defamed or lambasted at public School Committee meetings. Ms. LeBlanc urged the School Committee members to discourage disparaging remarks by terminating speakers' privileges of address which is stated in this forum's rules. Ms. LeBlanc hoped the School Committee will reflect on its obligation to foster public trust and by extension its obligation to prevent personal attacks, particularly on matters unrelated to public education.

Mr. Ross Bowdridge, MPS Staff

Mr. Bowdridge stated that public comments at School Committee meetings seem inequitable among the speakers. Mr. Bowdridge continued that according to the School Committee's own policy, speakers are allowed three minutes to speak. However, some people get cut off before their allotted three minutes while others have their extensions unlimited. Mr. Bowdridge asked to that published policies regarding public comment be followed, specifically as it relates to the Malden School Committee's public policies. Mr. Bowdridge read the following information that was published on the School Committee's website, for Section BEDH - Public Participation at School Committee Meetings:

#3 Topics for discussion must be limited to those items listed on the School Committee meeting agenda for that evening

#4 Improper conduct and remarks will not be allowed. Defamatory or abusive remarks are always out of order. If a speaker persists in improper conduct or remarks, the Chairperson may terminate that individual's privilege of address

#6 Speakers may offer such objective criticisms of the school operations and programs as concern them, but in public session the Committee will not hear personal complaints of school personnel nor against any member of the school community. Under most circumstances, administrative channels are the proper means for disposition of legitimate complaints involving staff members.

Mr. Tim Stratford, Educator at Ferryway School

Mr. Stratford who has worked at the Ferryway School as a Civics, History and Team Leader said that they completely refute the unfounded, disgraceful, false personal attacks and statements made at the last two School Committee meetings about Malden Education Association (MEA) President, Ms. Deb Gesualdo. Mr. Stratford said that as educators and community members, these personal attacks should never be tolerated. The MEA statement about the Gaza situation was a comprehensive plea to all leaders in all parts of society to help bring peace as well as comfort to Israelis and Arabs. It was not one-sided in any way. Mr. Stratford continued that those who are taking it out of context and attaching unjustified false comments through personal attacks on the union President are creating an inflammatory and divisive atmosphere. Mr. Stratford added that as educators who help students understand the proper and decent way to debate and discuss important sensitive topics, the first and most important rule is no personal attacks or "ad hominem". Mr. Stratford said that while it is understandable that emotions are high in the world and local environment, making public comments that are personal, misleading, reckless and blatantly false should be addressed, and properly disregarded. Mr. Stratford said that Ms. Deb Gesualdo is not a racist, antisemitic or creates a hostile environment but that she brings people together and supports every student, educator, staff as well as members of the entire Malden community. Mr. Stratford strongly recommend and implore the School Committee as well as the community to denounce the personal attacks on Ms. Deb Gesualdo as the polarizing, false and ill-informed comments are not what and how Malden educators teach students.

Ms. Penny Kalman, Educator at Salemwood School

Ms. Kalman was disappointed that the body allowed a member of the public speak such slander and hatred. Ms. Kalman said that even as a Jewish woman, she had also been accused of hatred toward her fellow Jews but Ms. Deb Gesualdo had her back. Ms. Kalman added that she was accused of inciting violence which were the exact words spoken about Ms. Deb Gesualdo. Ms. Kalman said that permitting the use of public comment to spread racism and hatred in our community should not be tolerated. Ms. Kalman continued that Ms. Gesulado and Ms. Van have her support because they work endlessly to help all students of Malden regardless of gender, race, religion and culture. Ms. Kalman said she was informed that some of the School Committee members were aware of these allegations and the speech prior to the meeting and she hoped that this was a false rumor. Ms. Kalman also spoke about equity across the K-8 buildings and asked how the total number of 6th grade students at one school be more than two times the number at another school. Ms. Kalman said that the math and science educators at the 6th grade level teach 118 students who have various needs and education plans, 45 minutes per period while a mile away, their colleagues at another school with the same expectations of meeting all the needs of the students, family outreach, extra help after school, MCAS scores, building relationships have less than half of the student load. Ms. Kalman mentioned that the students at the school get the same amount of individualized attention because of educators like Ms. Strayer and Ms. Lindquist who give it their all for their students. Ms. Strayer is even learning Portuguese on her own time while paying

a tutor so that she can communicate with her students and their families. Ms. Kalman said that Salemwood middle school educators are expected to teach curriculum five times a day whereas in other K-8 schools, they only teach four times a day. Ms. Kalman had hoped that this would have been solved years ago but it still persists. Ms. Kalman concluded that she hopes the new leadership at central office can right this wrong.

Ms. Dawn Marie O'Toole, Education Support Professional (ESP) at Beebe School
Ms. O'Toole spoke about policy BEDH - Public Participation at School Committee Meetings. Ms. O'Toole said that for many years, she has attended and participated at School Committee meetings, and many times the situation became heated over the budget, necessary cuts and teacher layoffs. Ms. O'Toole continued that former school committee members reminded those speaking of the three minute limit and that public comments needed to pertain to items on the agenda. Ms. O'Toole said that unfortunately, at recent meetings, some of these rules were not followed, time was reduced to two minutes and some speakers were allowed to use defamatory or abusive remarks which are also not allowed. Ms. O'Toole continued that speakers are however allowed objective criticisms of school operations and programs but the School Committee will not or should not hear personal complaints of school personnel or community members. Ms. O'Toole said that at recent School Committee meetings, this has been allowed to happen, which in turn has opened the door to unfounded complaints against staff, admin and School Committee members when caregivers are upset over grades, how classrooms are managed or even the business of running the schools. Ms. O'Toole was hopeful that this will be rectified at the meeting.

Superintendent's Report

1. District Updates and Highlights

Superintendent Noriega-Murphy welcomed Ms. Jodie Zalk from Malden Reads who gave a presentation about the literacy work that Malden Reads does for the schools and community. Ms. Zalk spoke about their partnerships and introduced the book of the year, "Being Heumann" by Judith Heumann with Kristen Joiner, as well as the companion books. Malden Reads presented copies of the book to the School Committee.

Mayor Christenson called for a recess at 6:33 p.m. The meeting resumed at 6:35 p.m.

Superintendent Noriega-Murphy continued providing updates on celebrations; early release on March 5th; 9th grade course registration; hiring fair; enrollment data; attendance; registration update; human resource and licensure support; and athletics update. Ms. Superintendent Noriega-Murphy concluded with a video about the Salemwood School.

In response to a question from Ms. Hortie, Superintendent Noriega-Murphy said that the MIAA allows sports programs with other districts if a district does not have enough students to form a team on their own. Superintendent Noriega-Murphy said that she can present more information at the next meeting.

Subcommittee Reports and Discussions

1. Budget Subcommittee Update – Ms. Spadafora

Ms. Spadafora said that the Budget Subcommittee met on February 12, 2024 for a high level view of the budget and discussion about the Chapter 70 funding as well as the next steps in the budget process. Ms. Spadafora said that the Chapter 70 funding increased by a little over \$600,000 and the overall increase including the city contribution totaled approximately \$3.5 million. Ms. Spadafora joined Mayor Christenson on February 22nd for a meeting in Boston with key people who decide on whether or not it was worthwhile to fix the Chapter 70 funding formula. They met with Assistant Secretary of Education at the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Tom Moreau, along with state legislators to look at what's wrong with the formula as many communities are suffering for different reasons including inflation rates. Ms. Spadafora said that everyone at the table agreed that the formula is flawed for Malden but no one had an answer on how it can be properly funded. Ms. Spadafora continued that nobody wants to take the first step, when speaking with the state legislators, to say that the formula is flawed for Malden but it is not for another community and that they might have to return some of their funding. Ms. Spadafora said that Mayor Christenson is working on setting up more meetings and hopefully with the Lieutenant Governor. Ms. Spadafora said that the Finance and Operations Director, Ms. Mertz, is working with the Superintendent Noriega-Murphy to meet with Principals to look at the budget based on needs vs. wants and whatever they can do to keep everything that is needed for the students. Ms. Spadafora said she spoke in front of City Council last week and mentioned \$8 million but that it is now in the \$1 million range deficit. Ms. Spadafora continued that she has faith that Ms. Mertz will continue to look at where changes can be made potentially to cut costs without interrupting day to day school activities. Ms. Spadafora said that the next meeting is scheduled for March 11, 2024 where the City Strategy Officer will be present to speak about the funding formula and how it affects the schools as well as the city as a whole.

2. Superintendent Search Committee Update – Ms. Spadafora

Ms. Spadafora said that two volunteer forms were sent out to MPS staff and caregivers to gauge interest in being part of the next Superintendent Search Committee. Ms. Spadafora continued that the key questions included reasons for wanting to volunteer, which school they represented with a focus on representation across all demographics for caregivers of students. Ms. Spadafora said that over 30 staff and over 30 caregivers responded. Ms. Spadafora and Ms. Rose-Zeiberg discussed doing a random selection but did not want to chance having participants from only a few demographic groups and therefore, came up with a list that represented a wider range of demographic groups.

Ms. Rose-Zeiberg said that the focus was also on stakeholders with students in different grades and schools without looking at the names of the applicants in an effort to obtain the broadest scope. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg said that when speaking to the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC), the feedback received was to never do a random selection. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg said that the volunteers could only be selected from the pool of applicants who submitted the forms. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg said that she would be happy to talk to anyone who has questions.

Ms. Spadafora read the following names of the Superintendent Search Committee members:
Malden School Committee Representatives: Jennifer Spadafora and Sharyn Rose-Zeiberg
Principal Representative: Adam Weldai - Forestdale School
Assistant Principal Representative: Jane Wright - Salemwood School

Unit A Representatives: Todd Cole - Malden High School, Sonia Miller - Linden School and Dr. Brian Sheehan - Salemwood School

Unit B Representatives: Cara Hovhanessian - Stem Director K-5 (District Wide) and Stephanie Scalese – Special Ed Program Manager (District Wide)

Unit C Representatives: Sammantha Dorazio - Substitute School Nurse (District Wide) and Dawn Marie O'Toole - Beebe ESP

Parent/Caregiver Representatives: Ashanafi Befekadu, Joshua Gold and Heather Segal

SEPAC Advisor: Amanda Ceide

Student Representative: Meklit “Meki” Abel

Ms. Spadafora said that the membership of the Superintendent Search Committee is before the School Committee for ratification.

Motions and Resolutions

1. Superintendent Search Committee Membership – Ms. Spadafora

Ms. Spadafora made the motion to ratify the membership of the Superintendent Search Committee. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg seconded. A roll call vote was taken.

Mr. Drummey voted YES

Mr. McCarthy voted YES

Ms. Spadafora voted YES

Ms. Macklin voted YES

Ms. Hortie voted YES

Mr. Gray voted YES

Mr. Bernard voted YES

Ms. Rose-Zeiberg voted YES

Mayor Christenson voted YES

Motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Spadafora said that the next steps will include an orientation meeting, focus groups as well as forums.

2. Substitute Teacher Daily Rate - Ms. Spadafora

Ms. Spadafora said that this matter was reviewed by the Budget Subcommittee in October 2023 and it was voted at the November 13, 2023 School Committee meeting where the substitute teacher daily rate was increased to \$100 per day for those without a degree, \$125 per day for those with a teacher certification and \$135 per day for retired teachers. Ms. Spadafora said that it was brought to her attention that there are questions about the verbiage and pay for those who have a degree but no teaching certificate as it is not specified.

Ms. Spadafora made the motion to have the Budget Subcommittee review this matter. Mr. Bernard seconded seconded and it was so VOTED. Motion passed unanimously.

3. Policy BEDH - Public Participation at School Committee Meetings – Ms. Rose-Zeiberg

Ms. Rose-Zeiberg said that questions have been raised about this policy. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg said that there is a need to be aligned with current state guidelines and laws. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg added that all the policies should be reviewed. Ms. Rose-Zeiberg said that information from the Middlesex District Attorney's Office can help with this process.

In response to Ms. Hortie, Ms. Rose-Zeiberg said that the Policy and Procedures Subcommittee meeting date will be scheduled and that the meeting will probably be in-person or hybrid.

Ms. Rose-Zeiberg made the motion to have the Policy and Procedures Subcommittee review this policy. Mr. McCarthy seconded and it was so VOTED. Motion passed unanimously.

Personal Privilege

Ms. Spadafora said the School Committee has been called out for not being transparent by certain groups in the city. Ms. Spadafora continued that recently, a local tabloid page wrote a story on the school district's finances asking where the money was going after she spoke in public comment before City Council, alluding to mismanagement of monies, which is furthest from the truth. Ms. Spadafora said that over the past few years, there has been repeated talk about the Chapter 70 formula and how it is flawed. Ms. Spadafora added that this is nothing new and they worked with what they had up until now. Inflation is at an all-time high, interest rates have skyrocketed, out-of-district costs have doubled, transportation costs have increased, and salaries have increased over 10% in the past few years. Ms. Spadafora added that the article mentioned an increase in legal expenditure and this is 100% true. Ms. Spadafora said that since December 2023, the School Committee received an unprecedented amount of Open Meeting Law (OML) violations, 31 as of March 4th and uncountable FOIA requests as can be seen under the Executive Session agenda. Ms. Spadafora continued that two organizations repeatedly inundate the city and district staff with frivolous complaints, and they are largely to blame for the increase in legal expenditures as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) has been weaponized and used to overwhelm the district continuously looking for a "gotcha" moment. Ms. Spadafora said she would speak more openly and freely but felt that the same organizations would try to find something wrong to file an OML complaint, and continue to waste taxpayer's money. Ms. Spadafora encouraged everyone to attend the Budget Subcommittee meetings and hear just exactly where the money is going.

Mayor Christenson said that State of the City presentation was held earlier that day and it is done annually. Mayor Christenson said that the presentation focused on the positive aspects and efforts made by the city as well as community. The presentation will be made available to the public soon. Mayor Christenson said that this year is Malden's 375th birthday and there have been many achievements. Mayor Christenson thanked everyone involved with the presentation. Mayor Christenson said the presentation ended with noting that there is no doubt challenges lie ahead but by working together, we can continue to move forward.

Executive Session

Ms. Spadafora made a motion to enter into Executive Session at 7:22 p.m. Mr. Bernard seconded. A roll call vote was taken.

Mr. Drummey voted YES

Mr. McCarthy voted YES

Ms. Spadafora voted YES

Ms. Macklin voted YES

Ms. Hortie voted YES
Mr. Gray voted YES
Mr. Bernard voted YES
Ms. Rose-Zeiberg voted YES
Mayor Christenson voted YES
Motion passed unanimously.

The committee reconvened to the Regular Session at 9:23 p.m.

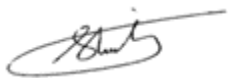
Ms. Spadafora made a motion to increase the stipend for the School Committee Clerk to \$4,000 per year effective immediately. Ms. Hortie seconded. A roll call vote was taken.

Mr. Drummey voted YES
Mr. McCarthy voted YES
Ms. Spadafora voted YES
Ms. Macklin voted YES
Ms. Hortie voted YES
Mr. Gray voted YES
Mr. Bernard voted YES
Ms. Rose-Zeiberg voted YES
Mayor Christenson voted NO
Motion passed with 8 votes in favor and 1 against.

Adjournment

Ms. Spadafora made a motion to adjourn at 9:24 p.m. in honor of Mayor Christenson's birthday. Mr. McCarthy seconded and it was so VOTED. Motion passed unanimously.

I certify that a notice of this meeting was filed with the Clerk of the City of Malden in the manner provided under Chapter 39, Section 23A of the General Laws.



Shirley Dorai, Clerk