



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

15 Charter Road Acton, MA 01720

978-264-4700

www.abschools.org

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

January 18, 2024 at 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, Ginny Kremer, Vikram Parikh, Leela Ramachandran, Yanxin Schmidt, Andrew Schwartz, Rebeccah Wilson

Members Absent: Lakshmi Kaja, Adam Klein

Others: Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Andrew Shen

1. **CALL TO ORDER (7:00)**

The ABRSC was called to order at 7:00 p.m. by Acton Vice Chairperson Rebeccah Wilson.

2. **CHAIRPERSON'S WELCOME - Rebeccah Wilson**

Members of the public who wished to watch the meeting online were invited to use Acton tv's youtube channel. It was stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website.

a. **Public Participation**

Rebeccah stated that per School Committee Policy BEDH, members of the public were invited to speak for up to 3 minutes. With the exception today of the Budget Presentation (see agenda), public participation would only take place at this time during the meeting for a maximum of 10 minutes. She welcomed everyone as she chaired her first meeting, in the Chair's absence.

Students from the Resource Force spoke about the resolution sent to the School Committee several months ago and reiterated their request for the Committee to support the resolution due to the significance of the climate crisis.

Several members of the public urged the Committee to reinstate public participation during agenda items as was previously done. It was pointed out that for finance committee members, and others, questions and comments often come up while an agenda item is being discussed. The ability to speak during the Budget discussion was appreciated.

b. **Superintendent's Update - Peter Light**

Mr. Light spoke about: Congratulations (644 ABRHS students received awards at our 24th Community Service Awards Ceremony), FY25 Budgetary Concerns, Kindergarten Tours, Cartwheel Care Webinar, and the AB Resource Center. The next Community Coffee with the Superintendent and School Committee Chairperson is January 30th at 7:00 p.m. via zoom.

3. **ONGOING BUSINESS (7:30)**

a. School Committee Communication Goal Update - *Rebecca Wilson*

Members continue to focus on communication with the public. Rebecca is scheduling two dates in March to meet with seniors at the Acton Senior Center to discuss the budget. Committee members can sign up to participate. Yanxin is setting up School Committee office hours in the Acton Town Hall, Acton Memorial Library, and the Boxborough Library. She will send a sign up for Committee members for that as well.

The meeting was suspended at 12:50 in the tape until 22:56 (approximately 7:15 p.m. - 7:25 p.m.) while the audio was being fixed.

b. Superintendent's Preliminary FY25 Budget Presentation - *Peter Light*

1. Superintendent's Preliminary Budget

1.1 Proposed Staffing (new positions, reductions, initiatives)

1.2 Preliminary Projection of Assessments and Reserves

Mr. Light presented the **FY25 Superintendent's Preliminary Budget** including an overview of both the A&B Budgets being prepared in anticipation of a tax override vote in Acton. The A Budget increases revenue by \$420K and reduces \$2.1M in expenses. The B Budget increases revenue by \$542K and reduces \$9.4M in expenses. Areas covered included:

- Budget Context - Process and Timeline, including what is driving the \$9.5M funding gap in the projections.
- FY25 Financial Overview - Revenue, Budget Projections and Reserves
- Important Dates:
 - Budget Workshop and Preliminary SC Budget Vote - **February 10**
 - Preliminary Budget Vote - **February 15**, 25 Days before final budget deadline. Vote is majority of members from each town.
 - Budget Hearing - **March 7**
 - Final SC Budget Vote - **March 21**, 45 Days before earliest Town Meeting, Vote is $\frac{2}{3}$ of weighted votes of full School Committee.
 - Town Meetings: ● Acton begins **May 6** ● Boxborough begins **May 13**. Budget vote deadlines are counted backwards from earlier Town Meeting.

The Override is a 2 step process:

1. Acton Annual Town Election (April 30)
 - Ballot Vote (Simple Majority)
2. Annual Town Meeting Approval
 - Simple Majority

- Acton - May 6, 2024
 - Boxborough - May 13, 2024
- FY25 Preliminary Reductions - A & B Budget Summaries
 - A Budget ○ \$2,142,069 Reductions ○ \$420,625 New Revenue ○ Reduces 25.5 staff ○ Maintains class sizes within guidelines ○ Continues to operate programs as previous
 - B Budget ○ \$9,400,231 Reductions ○ \$541,900 New Revenue ○ Reduces 90.4 Staff ○ Class sizes 2+ beyond guidelines ○ Transfers elementary students between schools ○ Significant impact on student supports ■ Mental Health, Academic, MTSS ○ Significant reliance on fees charged to families
 - Potential Structural Changes - Significant Changes to District Operations
 - Closing Thoughts: If AB were funded at the state average, this would yield an additional \$7,628,104 for the schools. In-District Per Pupil Spending (FY22) is \$19,554 however AB spends \$18,058. This is \$1,496 (8.3%) below state average per student. \$7,500,000 in additional revenue would fund the A Budget.
(Source: MA DESE Radar Benchmarking Online)

Learn more about the budget on the [FY25 Budget Page](#).

A 5 minute break was taken at approximately 8:30 p.m.

2. Public Participation on Budget Presentation #1 (10 minutes maximum)

Comments from the public included:

- Open enrollment has outlived its purpose. Why not close Conant.
(Response: This would have a broad impact and will be discussed in more detail at a future meeting.)
- The difference between cuts to teachers and cuts to administrators should be more proportionate.
- B Budget is a disaster. Acton does not have the same tax base as other towns being compared to.
- This should not be a binary choice between A and B. The Town of Acton also has budgetary restraints. Consider a C budget.
- Create incentives for employees to leave the District's health care plan (switch to a spouse's plan?).
- Ongoing programs have been funded with one time funding over the years and now we have to face the costs.
- Although student enrollment has declined, our special education students are coming with higher incidents of more significant needs due to early intervention and medical care. Supporting all of these students falls within School Committee budget guidelines.
- Transportation cuts are an issue for Boxborough due to few sidewalks. The Boxborough Finance Committee probably won't support an override.
- The public needs clarification of the Health Insurance Trust issues and the burden being carried by the schools vs. the Town of Acton.

Comments from School Committee members included:

- Clarification was provided: There is no “\$9.5M budget” - there is a projection for a \$9.5M funding gap. The A Budget is not “level service”. The A Budget has \$7.5M in additional revenue. The B Budget has zero additional revenue (beyond a 3% assessment increase for Acton and approximately 6% assessment increase for Boxborough).
- The latest census shows that 40% of households in Acton have children under the age of 18. These may not be students, but they will be coming to school.
- The community needs to talk about the structural changes: open enrollment, transportation and health insurance. (Response: Eliminating open enrollment would not provide immediate savings for FY25 and may be more expensive initially, but could be beneficial in the longer term. It would have a huge impact on our community in many ways.)
- Educators were thanked for doing “more with less” for so many years at AB. The President of the ABEA stated that for the past two years, cuts have been made that are “not in the best interest of students”. Staff have never been so anxious, even during covid. The most significant part of the budget is educators. We cannot continue to cut them.
- Several members stated that the override must pass. Several wanted to see a fully funded budget.
- The need for athletics and sports for kids should not be underestimated.
- AB has not had an override since 2005, 20 years ago. It is not sustainable to run an excellent school system under proposition 2 ½ and that is why the “safety valve” of an override is provided.

Mr. Light asked the Committee what they would like to see in a C Budget. After discussion, there was consensus that it should not just be something between the A and B versions, but instead it should grow the reductions offered in the A Budget and the public should react and provide feedback. Mr. Light noted that it will be difficult to find savings in health care right away due to the deadlines to switch plans and the many unknowns. It is currently being evaluated but will not provide much relief for this budget process, in his opinion. It is in the District’s best interest to consider health care savings as a long term issue. There may be a way to use more of an override amount in the first year if strategies for long term savings are provided.

Mr. Light confirmed that the Committee was asking him to try to increase reductions to the A Budget, while limiting the impact on groups already affected disproportionately (special education), and to the extent possible not cutting costs that directly affect students. Although a member advocated for a “level service” C Budget, there was consensus from members that the A Budget was their preference. A member suggested that the only structural item that may provide some small savings right away could be cutting bus transportation for students living within 1.5 miles of their schools.

c. [School Resource Officer Program](#) - **VOTE** - *Rebecca Wilson*

The recommendations to be added to the proposed state MOU are additional guardrails to ensure student safety and police accountability. The power to enforce these guardrails rests with the superintendent and ultimately the school committee. Although some people would like to remove police from the schools, there is a need for support for students and staff, which requires funding. If funding existed, we would probably hire a licensed clinical social worker, and several additional counselors. Currently the funding for the SRO program is part of the broader police budget paid by the town of Acton. As a result, ending the SRO program would not save money for the district. The SRO program will continue to be evaluated, with the opportunity for an annual review and discussion about whether to continue it or not. The public was encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives of the program. The District wants to ensure that all students feel safe, and all parents feel empowered to advocate for themselves and their children without repercussion.

Comments from the Committee included:

- Current MOU has limited accountability, transparency, and oversight. It only recommends future agreements.
- Nationally there is no data showing that police keep kids safer in schools.
- Members want to push the recommendations strongly with the Chief.

Leela Ramachandran moved, Ginny Kremer seconded and it was,

VOTED: to continue the School Resource Officer Program and to authorize the Superintendent of Schools to jointly develop a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Acton and Boxborough police departments based on the state-wide model memorandum and which incorporates recommendations from the District's School Resource Officer Subcommittee, and the School Committee will reconsider the program in FY25.

(YES: Campbell, Fowlks, Kremer, Ramachandran, Schmidt, Wilson

NO: Bloomenthal, Parikh ABSTAINED: Schwartz)

The Committee would like to review what is discussed with the police before it is formally voted on. Mr. Light will be negotiating with the Chief and noted that the School Committee would authorize the MOU.

d. [FY25 School Calendar](#) - Second Read - **VOTE** - *Peter Light*

Vikram Parikh moved, Ben Bloomenthal seconded and it was,

VOTED: to accept the 2024-2025 Academic Calendar as proposed.

(YES: Bloomenthal, Campbell, Fowlks, Kremer, Parikh, Schmidt, Schwartz, Wilson)

ABSTAINED: Ramachandran)

e. Subcommittee and Member Reports

i. Budget Subcommittee - *Rebecca Wilson, Jan. 8*

Budget proposals were discussed, and best ways to communicate with the public around the deficit. Members want to do as little harm to the student educational

experience as possible, understanding that this crisis must be resolved in a way that moves the District forward, so we are not faced with this same issue in the short term. Most municipalities require an override every 10 years or 20 years. Our last override in Acton was in 2005. The public was invited to reach out with questions and suggestions. The ABRSD website now features a budget tab on the homepage, so everyone can access timely and accurate information.

- ii. *Acton Leadership Group - Tori Campbell, Rebecca Wilson, Jan. 10*
ALG discussed updates to the FY24 budget, preliminary budget projections for FY25, the multi-year financial model, details of the proposed operational override and budget targets for the ALG model. Members agreed to update the ALG bylaws to allow the possibility of meeting virtually in the event of inclement weather, a change from following school delays or closures. Members also agreed to discuss with their respective entities a proposed \$10M maximum on the Acton override.

ALG is currently considering an A Budget of \$9.8M with \$2.5M in untaxed levy capacity and reductions in the town's operating budget of \$1M and the district's of \$2M from level services in the Acton assessment. This proposal would reduce the overall district's operating budget by about \$2.5M from level services when accounting for the corresponding reduction from Boxborough's share of the operating budget, a total of about \$500K more than the current School Committee's A Budget guidance. This proposal will be built into the ALG budget model for further discussion.

The Acton Finance Committee is expected to update its override proposal based on the entities' budget analyses and present it for discussion at the next ALG meeting, on Jan 29 at 7:30 on Zoom and in Room 204 of Town Hall.

- iii. *Capital Subcommittee - Ben Bloomenthal, Jan. 17*
Projects were discussed including the recent water line repair and ongoing Parker Damon control system update. FY25 priorities, cost estimates and potential funding were discussed based on the current A and B Budgets. The Fuel Depot was also discussed.

- f. *Consent Agenda/Action Items - **VOTE** - Rebecca Wilson*
 - i. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 12/7/23 and 1-4-24 (*Addendum*)
 - ii. Endorsement of Community Preservation Fund Open Space Reserve (\$51,270) and Community Preservation FY25 budgeted reserve (\$60,860) for Blanchard Playground Project
 - iii. Friends of the Acton Libraries \$20,000 donation to ABRSD Libraries
 - iv. Danny's Place \$5,000 grant to Community Education
 - v. Cheer uniform \$3,700 donation and baseball uniform \$3248.75 donation to Athletics
 - vi. Special Olympics \$1,000 donation to Athletics
- Mr. Light requested that the Community Preservation Fund item be removed from the agenda.

Tori Campbell moved, Ben Bloomenthal seconded and it was unanimously,
VOTED: to approve the consent agenda as amended.

- g. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve [1-18-24](#) - **VOTE** - *Rebecca Wilson*
Liz Fowlks moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously,
VOTED: to approve the warrants (See memo language).

4. **ADJOURN**

Tori Campbell moved, Ben Bloomenthal seconded and it was unanimously,
VOTED: to adjourn the ABRSC at 10:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: agenda, agenda item summary pages, Superintendent's Preliminary Budget slides, School Resource Officer Program memo from P. Light 12/1/23, SRO MOU Recommendations amended 1/18/24, FY25 Proposed School Calendar, Draft School Committee meetin minutes of 12/7 and 1/4/24 from B. Petr, Friends of the Acton Libraries Donation letter, Danny's Place Grant letter, Cheer and Baseball uniforms donation letter, Special Olympics donation letter, Statement of Warrants memo from S. Matthews 1/12/24.

NEXT MEETING: February 1, 2024 at 7:00 p.m. in the Administration Building Auditorium