



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

15 Charter Road Acton, MA 01720

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www.abschools.org

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

April 13, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.

Administration Building Auditorium To view only: <https://www.youtube.com/actontv1>

APPROVED MINUTES

Members Present: Ben Bloomenthal, Kyra Cook, Liz Fowlks, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, Yebin Wang, Rebekkah Wilson

Members Absent: Evelyn Abayaah-Issah, Andrew Schwartz

Others: Marie Altieri, Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino

1. CALL TO ORDER & CHAIRPERSON'S WELCOME - *Kyra Cook*

The ABRSC was called to order at 7:01 p.m. by Chairperson Kyra Cook.

Members of the public were invited to watch the meeting online using Acton tv's youtube channel. The Chair stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website at actontv.org.

Six Acton residents are running for the three open seats in the election on April 25. They are: Courtney Barrieault, Victoria Campbell, Jason Fitzgerald, Michael Gowing, Leela Ramachandran and Yanxin Schmidt. Four Boxborough residents are running for the two open seats for Boxborough residents in their election on May 16. They are: Rick Barrett, Chad Childers, Lakshmi Kaja, and Vikram Parikh. Several Acton candidates in attendance shared a few words.

a. ABRHS Student Representative Update - *Rohan Ravindran, Harshini Magesh, Molly Norris, Diksha Mhatre, Julia Zhou*

The students spoke about an upcoming book fair event including an AB grad author who will speak about mental health, the change in course levels that some students are confused, concerned and not happy about, the increase in sharing cultures, diversity and cultural awareness in the High School, and upcoming Field Day.

b. Public Participation - none

c. Superintendent's Update - *Peter Light*

After congratulating upcoming AB grads on their recent Seal of Biliteracy awards, Mr. Light spoke about:

- AB Offers Portuguese Language and Culture Course for Staff
- ABRSD Awarded \$200,000 Accelerating Literacy Learning through High Quality Instructional Materials Grant

- ABRSD Awarded \$26,000 Civics Teaching and Learning Grant
- Leadership Coalition to Combat Hate and Bias in Schools
- Project Graduation's urgent need for volunteers
- Upcoming Cartwheel Care Webinars - Positive Relationships with Screen-Based Technology
- Community Coffees

2. Public Hearing: FY24 ABRSD MA DESE School Choice Program - Marie Altieri

a. Call to Order

The FY24 ABRSD MA DESE School Choice Program Public Hearing was called to order at 7:18 p.m. by Chairperson Kyra Cook.

Marie Altieri reported on the history and status of Choice students in our district, noting that districts receive about \$5000 per Choice student. Staff students who attend AB are not considered Choice students. The Administration's recommendation is to remain withdrawn from the program due to lack of available seats.

b. Adjourn

Adam Klein moved, Liz Fowlks seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to adjourn the hearing at 7:22 p.m.

c. FY24 ABRSD MA DESE School Choice Program Participation - **VOTE** - Kyra Cook

Adam Klein moved, Liz Fowlks seconded and it was unanimously,

VOTED: to remain withdrawn from the School Choice program due to class size and space limitations, noting that existing school choice students will remain through graduation.

3. GUESTS AND PRESENTATIONS

a. R.J. Grey Junior High School Update - *Principal Jim Marcotte*

Mr. Marcotte presented on the common thread this year at RJG, "Relationships Matter". This included the LIFTS Training for staff, Culturally Responsive Teacher Leaders, and improved Family Communication.

Comments from the Committee included:

- Members look forward to May's data, hoping for an increase in the number of students who have a relationship with staff.
- With anti semitism surging in the commonwealth, parents have concerns. Mr. Marcotte agreed that this is an important issue to address.
- Advisories and peer leader programs have been changed many times at the High School. Is there conversation about those groups? There has been a lot of talk about streamlining across buildings. Mr. Marcotte replied that the Jr High advisory program works for the Jr High but he cannot comment about how it would work at the High School, although there is opportunity for the two principals to work together on something like this. Mr. Light added that the reason most districts don't call it "Junior High" is because it is a middle level

with unique developmental issues, not a junior version of High School. 7th graders are just entering and 8th graders are focused on getting to High School.

- It is good that the staff reaches out to families at the beginning of the year, especially for families for whom English is not their first language.

b. ABRHS Update - *Principal Joanie Dean*

i. Course Level Update

Mr. Light asked Ms. Dean and her faculty/staff to develop a program of multi-year work examining course levels. This year she met with all department heads and developed a team that met weekly. Their work was presented in parent forums and included a video format with a survey that was distributed districtwide. Presentations were also done at the High School for students. A followup staff survey is being done. The goal this year was to get enough initial feedback to review over the summer and fall to hone the proposal. He stressed that this meeting is a midpoint of the discussion, not the end. More work will be done in the fall culminating in a proposal to vote on in December. The Adoption of New Programs and Courses of Study policy IGD was referenced. More feedback from the School Committee is being requested so the team can consider it before the Fall presentation.

Principal Dean was excited to share the ABRHS year in review. When faculty and students were asked what they wanted out of our community and schools - a respectful and inclusive community was the response from both groups. She spoke about Community Involvement, Advisories and Course Leveling. Team sizes have been made much smaller (400 instead of 800 students). Teachers have really stepped up this year to take on new tasks, without taking anything away. Students require more thought, care and time from all educators to meet them where they are. Events this year were amazing, including athletics, performing arts, and over 100 clubs. Teacher leadership has been at an all time high this year with peer leaders in every department. Advisories are mixed grades with 8-12 students in each group. Members sit in a circle, technology free. Ms Dean described it as "heading in the right direction". The goal of Advisory is to create a cohesive community that encourages students to connect with peers and staff. Education is now more about problem solving, collaboration, and critical thinking in a variety of settings.

Goals for the new levels proposal are:

1. Students will have increased access, opportunities, and choice to study advanced level coursework.
2. Students will have access to a broader range of learning and social interactions that will better prepare them for today's world.

Regarding course levels, comments from the Annual Senior Survey were very negative about the effects of leveling classes. The Administration feels that a

rigid leveling system can have a stark impact on students' social emotional learning. It's important for students to feel balanced emotionally and that they belong to learn. It is thought that when kids take lower level courses there are few opportunities to move out of those levels. Many of our students could and should be provided more opportunities to move up in course work. Our instruction will also have to shift with a new plan. This is based on educational research and AB is not alone in doing this work. Many comments have stressed the need to support our teachers during this transition. Survey responses will be shared when they are all in.

Comments from the Committee included:

- This work is appreciated. The idea that disability is related to intelligence is a tough pill to swallow. The most positive experiences for one student have been in heterogeneous classes.
- Some students take honors classes to get the weighted gpa. This needs to be eliminated. (This will be discussed by the team next year.)
- All students should get to access whatever level they want to take, without "having to beg a teacher to take it".
- It is important to differentiate between course level and tracking. We have to be really careful about the school profile.
- A student's status should not be a determinant of ability in school.
- Regarding the 4 year Proposed Plan slide - The plan to change all of the classes at the same time, analyzing along the way, and adjusting. Mr. Light suggested a starting point for this is the first link on the Education Research slide 7 regarding the Meta-Analysis Marshall memo.
- A Committee member stated that AB is at least 20 years behind in just now considering this change to our classes. There are differences between levels and tracking. The way that we deliver education with a tracked system is not pedagogy-wise the best system. We are trying to deliver excellent education, the difference is not the leveling but the tracking.

A member of the public asked how the community could better understand this issue. Show people with examples or a sample lesson. Concern was expressed about how this issue is being communicated. A student stated that students should be able to access the classes they need and want because they need to be successful. Having only two levels could create more separation, a greater divide. This student appreciated that she could talk to more students when she was in a mixed grade class. Another student agreed about the benefit of heterogeneous classes. Ms. Dean agreed that students need to be more involved in this discussion. Watching the social interactions in a learning environment is very important.

4. ONGOING BUSINESS

a. Budget Update - *Peter Light*

i. Staffing Updates

1. Request for two additional Kindergarten sections

After careful evaluation of kindergarten enrollment, it was decided to reduce the current number of sections by 2 in the previously proposed budget. Having now completed the initial round of kindergarten registration, the enrollment trends have bounced back. This means kids are returning to the schools post pandemic and that is good news. More kindergartners will also move in over the summer. As a result, it is important to add back these two sections. This can be covered within the proposed budget due to late unexpected retirements. These two sections are needed to maintain class sizes within School Committee parameters. If enrollment dips, a section could be eliminated next year.

2. Request for Assistant Director of Special Education

Mr. Light is “very conflicted” about this request because we are in such a challenging budget situation but the post pandemic numbers of challenging student issues are exceeding our coordinators’ case levels. He proposed using circuitbreaker funds for the first and maybe second years and then decide if it should be added to the budget permanently. He acknowledged that the District has eliminated three administrative positions over the past two years and the resulting impact that has had. Director of Special Education elaborated that this is being recommended primarily at the elementary level for case coordination supporting teachers and families before the students move on to the secondary level. There has to be the right balance of service between the schools. If the Committee agrees, the job would be posted tomorrow because it is hiring season. Jen would lead the process.

Given significant turnover in special education leadership over the past few years, a member stated that this new position provides some succession planning and that is important. Mike Balulescu, President of the ABEA and AB parent, appreciated the attention on special education and doesn’t doubt that the work is needed. He expressed concern about a teacher whose colleague has been cut and they’ve been told they cannot get help, but now they hear that \$120,000 is found to cover these needs. He asked, “Why is this the need?”. Mr. Light appreciated Mike’s point and didn’t disagree with the concern. He replied that it is similar to why 3 ELE were added this year. We’re still committed to adding staff if we can but meeting IEP needs is a moral and legal obligation. The District “needs to stabilize the special education leadership”. Amanda Bailey, SEPAC Chair, asked why we keep churning through special ed

leadership? Jen Truslow responded that adding this position is a chance to improve that. The number of students being evaluated is very high now. Also a new version of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) is being rolled out so that will involve more training. Mr. Light added that consistency and clarity of process is critical. Without it, more time is spent and frustration increases. Communication around complex cases has been an issue for us. When people can't get to Jen (Truslow) it trickles down and creates a lot of frustration.

A member of the public expressed concern about adding two kindergarten sections to the base budget given the budget challenges facing the district next year. He strongly advocated for adding only one section at this time.

- ii. Approval of FY24 Line Item Budget (no change to overall budget) - **VOTE** - *Kyra Cook*

Liz Fowlks suggested amending the proposed motion to add only one kindergarten teacher because this has been such a difficult budget process. She advocated for waiting to see if it becomes critical to add an additional section. Members understood her point, but adding a section later usually means older students have to be moved between schools. Right now we're at 319 K students registered with 15-20 more students expected to register over the summer and 15 sections planned. Class size guidelines are 18-20 students per K class. For 15 sections that would be 21.2 kids, 16 sections (add 1) would be 20 kids and 17 (add 2) sections would result in 18.5 per class. This includes growth over the summer.

Tessa McKinley moved, Adam Klein seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to approve the line item budget as presented in the packet with the stipulation that the total budget and assessments remain unchanged from the committee final budget vote on March 16, 2023.

- b. Superintendent Evaluation Process Reminder - *Peter Light*
Members will be sent the evaluation digitally to complete. More evidence will be provided after the next meeting. Mr. Light explained the process using the statewide rubric. The goal is to have all of the evidence by May 4th, then members have two weeks to complete their evaluation and send it to Kyra and Beth as secretary. Pointing to evidence is very important. This is a shared document. Adam and Kyra will collaborate on the final composite summary evaluation for Mr. Light for a reading and vote at the June 8th School Committee meeting.
- c. Subcommittee and Members' Report
 - i. Acton Leadership Group - *Amy Krishnamurthy*

- Peter shared the budget information. Next meeting will be in July.
- ii. Community Engagement - *Andrew Schwartz* - *meeting tomorrow*
 - iii. Policy Subcommittee - *Ginny Kremer*
Met last week. They are meeting with Scouts' reps per SC direction and plan to bring a new Facilities Use policy draft to the May 18th meeting.
 - iv. Budget Subcommittee - *Adam Klein*
Update was included in tonight's discussion. Also discussed Annual Town Meeting presentations. Will be in next SC meeting's FYI.
 - v. School Resource Officer Subcommittee - *Rebecca Wilson*
Reviewed potential survey questions to elicit community feedback. Next meeting will include Police Chief Jim Cogan and Sgt Keith Campbell on May 3.
- d. Consent Agenda/Action Items - **VOTE** - *Kyra Cook*
- i. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 3/2/23 and 3/16/23
 - ii. New R.J. Grey JHS Club-Neurodiversity Club
Ginny Kremer moved, *Adam Klein* seconded and it was unanimously **VOTED**: to approve the consent agenda
- e. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve - **VOTE** - *Kyra Cook*
Tessa McKinley moved, *Amy Krishnamurthy* seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to approve the warrants (see motion in memo)

FYI -

- Proposed ABRSC Meetings for 2023-2024
- ABRSD Cartwheel-DMG Workshop - 3/31/23
- Monthly Student Enrollment - 4/1/23
- Acton and Boxborough Town Election Calendars

Mr. Light highlighted the proposed meetings list to be confirmed when the five new members are in attendance. He will ask that the new Committee consider doing one full day workshop over the summer. With so many new members, this would be an excellent way to set the right tone. He would also like to consider starting meetings at 6:30 instead of 7:00 next year.

Kyra Cook, Evelyn Abayaah-Issah, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, and Yebin Wang were thanked for their many years of service to the Committee. This was the retiring Acton members' last meeting. Retiring Boxborough members have one more to attend.

5. **ADJOURN**

Ginny Kremer moved, *Adam Klein* seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to adjourn the ABRSC meeting at 10:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: Agenda, Agenda item summary pages, School Choice Hearing memo and state information from M Altieri, RJGJHS Presentation Slides from J. Marcotte, ABRHS Presentation Slides from J. Dean, High School Course Leveling Plan Update from P. Light, Adoption of New Programs policy IGD, HS Community Forum Survey Themes, FY24 Budget, Staffing Update and Request memo from P. Light, Assistant Director of Special Education Proposal Memo from J. Truslow, FY24 Budget Files, Special Education Program Review Executive Summary December 2022, Assistant Dir of Special Education Draft Job Description, End-of-Cycle Summative Evaluation Report - Superintendent, District and Superintendent Goals, 2022-2023 Oct 20, 2022, Evaluating the SUpervisor MASC Training slides, ABRSC Draft Minutes of March 2, 2023, ABRSC Draft Minutes of March 16, 2023, New RJGJHS Club - Neurodiversity Club memo from J. Marcotte, Warrants Memo from D. Verdolino, FY24 ABRSC Draft List of Meetings, Cartwheel Care presentation slides, Monthly Student Enrollment, Acton and Boxborough Annual Election Calendars