



## Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

15 Charter Road Acton, MA 01720

978-264-4700

[www.abschools.org](http://www.abschools.org)

### Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting

November 2, 2023 Executive Session 6:45 p.m./ Open Meeting 7:15 p.m.

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

---

### APPROVED OPEN MINUTES

Members Present: Ben Bloomenthal, Tori Campbell, Lakshmi Kaja, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Vikram Parikh, Leela Ramachandran, Yanxin Schmidt, Andrew Schwartz, Rebeccah Wilson

Members Absent: Liz Fowlks

Others: Deborah Bookis, Peter Light, Sheri Matthews, Andrew Shen, public members

---

1. **CALL TO ORDER** (6:45)

The ABRSC was called to order at 6:45 p.m. by Chairperson Adam Klein.

**EXECUTIVE SESSION** (6:45)

Adam stated the need to meet in Executive Session pursuant to:

- MGL Ch 30A, sec. 21(a) Purpose 2: to conduct strategy sessions in preparation for negotiations with non union personnel, or to conduct contract negotiations with nonunion personnel.

Ben Bloomenthal moved, Tori Campbell seconded and it was unanimously,

**VOTED by Roll Call:** to enter executive session for the reason given.

(YES: Bloomenthal, Campbell, Kaja, Klein, Kremer, Parikh, Ramachandran, Schmidt, Schwartz, Wilson)

It was stated that the Committee would return to Open Meeting at approximately 7:15 p.m.

**OPEN MEETING** (approximately 7:15)

At 7:15 p.m, members returned to Open Meeting. Members of the public who wished to watch the meeting online were invited to use Acton tv's youtube channel (found at the top of the agenda). It was stated that the meeting was being recorded and would be posted on Acton TV's website.

2. **CHAIRPERSON'S WELCOME** - *Adam Klein*

- a. ABRHS Student Representative Update - Molly Norris '25, Julia Zhou '26, Diksha Mhatre '26, Nikhil Nomula '26, Jadon Yang '26

Adam welcomed the Student Rep update. Molly spoke for the group due to a conflict with an orchestra concert. She expressed frustration that Halloween costumes were not allowed in the

elementary and Jr High schools this year due to cultural opposition and cost. Molly felt that it is important for kids to have joy as part of their school experience and Halloween is enjoyable.

b. Public Participation

Per School Committee Policy, members of the public were invited to speak for up to 3 minutes. A maximum of 20 minutes would be dedicated to public participation. Adam reminded everyone that speakers must be recognized by the Chair before speaking, the committee does not typically respond to comments during public participation, and, this is the only time the public is invited to address the committee regarding items both on and off the agenda.

With many teachers in the audience, Mike Balulescu spoke as an Acton resident, Merriam parent and President of the Acton Boxborough Education Association Teachers' Union. He strongly advocated for supporting an operating override, asking the School Committee to "take bold action to make sure our schools are fully funded". He stated that next year's budget deficit of \$7M leaves us no choice.

Judith Aronstein, representing Acton's Mothers Out Front, spoke in strong support of the Resource Force resolution that the students are asking the School Committee to support. Given the climate and overwhelming concern for the health and safety of our children, the students' work and this resolution deserved Mothers Out Front's support.

Scott Smyers asked for an explanation of the change in the public participation process due to how difficult he felt it would now be to get questions answered during a meeting. Adam replied that this change was made to allow members to have questions before a presentation was being done and answer them during that time. This change was discussed two or three meetings ago. Mr. Smyers also asked whether the Town has to pay for the new residents that will be moved here by the State according to the Right to Shelter law. A woman spoke in favor of welcoming these new residents, who are mostly students. Mr. Smyers and another woman expressed serious concern about the need for an override.

c. Superintendent's Update - *Peter Light*

Mr. Light spoke about: Congratulations to students and the Marching Band, the 2024-2025 School Budget, Multilingual Night and School Visits.

3. **GUESTS & PRESENTATIONS (7:40)**

a. [Resource Force Student Presentation](#) - *Sneha Iyer, Tanish Ghosh, and Austin Kim*

Resource Force is a student-led team pursuing carbon neutrality in Acton and Boxborough. Last June, they sent a decarbonization resolution to the School Committee for consideration. Currently, this resolution is their main focus, although they have also worked on other projects like the Town of Acton's Power Choice Program. Their resolution is a pathway for ABRSD to cut back on its carbon footprint through multiple actionable steps with firm deadlines. It was noted that the Town of Acton has already committed to reaching net zero

emissions in its Climate Action Plan. The school district has the largest municipal carbon footprint in terms of electricity and natural gas by far. This is important to also set an example.

As a public entity, the School Committee was asked to move along with the Town and state government in climate initiatives:

- 100% of electricity from renewable energy sources as soon as possible
- Integrating on-site solar and battery storage to the fullest extent possible
- Electrify all school buses by 2026
- Electrify grounds equipment and other vehicles by 2030
- Electrify all buildings by 2045
- An annual public progress report

Recognizing budgetary restrictions, Force members closed with a quote from Bill McKibbin, “Winning slowly is the same as losing.” Several School Committee members spoke in favor of the excellent presentation.

#### 4. **NEW BUSINESS** (7:50)

##### a. Finance Update - *Sheri Matthews*

##### i. [FY25 Early Budget Projections](#) - *Peter Light, Sheri Matthews, Andrew Shen*

Adam noted that this presentation is a month or two ahead of previous years due to serious concern about a shortfall. Mr. Light noted that this is no surprise because we have known that our budget has a structural challenge of keeping under a 3% increase, as is common in the state. There are also unique pressures driving our expenses at the same time. He thanked Sheri Matthews and the Finance Team as well as Andrew Shen and the HR Team for their significant efforts. Mr. Light stressed that these are projections and a model, not his budget proposal at this time, to be used to set the Committee’s budget guidelines. Overall, our expenses are expected to exceed our revenues by \$7M. See memo and slides.

Recap (slide 9)

→ 3 consecutive years of shortfall

→ Extraordinary increases to fixed costs: Health Insurance & Fringes, In-district Special Education & English Language Services, Out of District Special Education Tuitions & Transportation, Inflation - Utilities, Supplies & Maintenance, Capital

→ Grants & federal funding expiring or have expired → Structural problem with school budget exacerbated by extraordinary circumstances - revenues cannot keep up with costs → If no change to revenue or reserve usage, catastrophic impact on students

What happened / Why Now? (slide 10)

- Budget Gap is not a new problem - 3 years in the making - reserves depleted
- Problems are coming in areas that have “big numbers”
  - Health Insurance alone makes up between \$2-3M of the gap (still TBD)
  - Special Education costs \$2.6M of Gap
    - OOD tuitions state-approved rate increases = 20% in two years
    - Transportation: Special Education, Homeless & Foster Care

- In-district student needs required increased staffing
- Circuit Breaker reserve depleted by rising costs
- Inflation for supplies, materials, technology, maintenance

The Administration asked the School Committee for direction on:

- Budget Guidelines - Need to have clear priorities & direction.
- Reserve usage - How much can we use?
- Fees - What fees can be increased or introduced to offset cost?
- Revenue - What direction are we going? Do we need to ask for more money from towns, given a \$7M gap and responsibilities that need to be balanced?

Mr. Light and his staff were thanked for their work on bringing this to the Committee early so they could begin discussion. He was asked to elaborate on the “structural problem” of our budget. Why are budgets exceeding 3% if the revenues available are capped at 3%? If everything increases 3% but an item exceeds that (health insurance) that has to come out of something else and continues in future years. Everything will be considered as we move forward on the budget process.

ii. Member Town Finance Committee Updates

The Acton Fincom will present at the next meeting and Mr. Light and Adam will attend one of their meetings to keep them up to date. The Boxborough Fincom shared their objectives and strategies for FY25. Their main budget drivers are Education, Retirements and Employee Benefits. Their budget guidelines for FY25 Education are:

- Target 5.5% increase (vs. 5.2% increase in FY24)
- Recognize increasing enrollment from Boxborough

An Acton Fincom member asked several questions of the Committee re COLAs. Andrew Shen explained the District’s personnel increases. Substitute teachers are also included in that budget line. Also several special education teachers were added after last year’s budget was approved due to requirements. No new positions have been added for next year.

iii. [FY25 Budget Timeline](#) - **VOTE** - Adam Klein

Rebecca Wilson moved, Leela Ramachandran seconded and it was unanimously, **VOTED**: to approve the Budget Timeline.

iv. FY25 Budget Guidelines - First Read - Adam Klein

Yanxin asked everyone to contact our representative to express concern about the budget issues and stop pitting residents against each other. Help is needed from the top. Guidelines are to give the Administration direction. Mr. Light said they are helpful but there will have to be a lot of give and take. Class size and programs are the two levers to address these financial challenges. This is why the guidelines look very different from previous years. They are a form of a measuring stick of what we’ve agreed are important, of the Committee’s goals. Additional feedback should be sent to Adam or Rebecca. These will be voted on at the next meeting.

5. **ONGOING BUSINESS (8:45)**

a. School Committee Communication Goal Update - *Adam Klein*

Octoberfest outreach was very successful in hearing people's thoughts - most said they are here for the schools. This is important work for committee members. The Walk Against Hate was heartwarming but distressing that it had to happen. The number of different groups and students in attendance was outstanding. The residents were asked to stay engaged throughout the budget process and ask questions now. Adam asked for suggestions regarding next items for outreach opportunities.

b. Subcommittee and Member Reports

i. Health Insurance Trust (HIT), *Oct. 26*

Mr. Light gave an update on the most recent information. The 3 month average per employee per month claim increases for BCBS is 16% and for HPHC it is 33%. The HIT does not have sufficient funds on hand to pay all claims. The HIT voted to require a \$2M payment from town/schools to the trust (FY24). In addition,

→ Option 1: January 1st - 13.2% rate increase; additional July 18.6% rate increase

→ Option 2: (Preferred Option) January 1st - 22.8% rate increase that continues into FY25

→ \$1.4M - Cost to District for 22.8% Rate increase (FY24)

→ \$1.2-1.6M - Cost to District for share of \$2M payment

\$2.6-3M - Total potential liability to District (needs validation)

Next Steps:

1. We need additional information from the HIT and anticipate this will follow from their next scheduled meeting on November 9, 2023.

2. We recommend hiring an analyst to independently review claims and the financial position of the trust and advise us and the Town of Acton about logical next steps.

3. We recommend that the school committee's budget subcommittee discuss options available to the district that identify up to \$2.6M-\$3M in funds in FY24 that can be redirected to cover HIT costs. The administration is working to develop 1-2 options to bring to the committee.

4. We recommend that the Town and Schools urgently convene a joint committee to study health insurance options beyond FY24.

We may be able to withdraw some of our OPEB Trust funds to use for this expense but there are many questions. Adam hopes to support our employees in this large unexpected rate increase in their health insurance.

ii. Capital Subcommittee - *Ben Bloomenthal, Oct. 25*

Members discussed the leaking Administration Building roof as top priority, as well as the High School roof top units, tennis court repairs, current outstanding bonds and plans for the FY25 budget.

- iii. Policy Subcommittee - *Leela Ramachandran, Oct. 26*  
Members engaged school leadership in policy discussions around personal technology devices like cell phones. They also talked about including students in the discussion.
- iv. Budget Subcommittee - *Rebecca Wilson, Oct. 30*  
See above including budget guidelines discussion. Mr. Light noted that given the recent developments, he has put into place a full spending freeze. Essential things are ok but require prior authorization from Sheri to be sure we're sticking to essentials.

- c. Consent Agenda/Action Items - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*
  - i. Approval of ABRSC Meeting Minutes of 10/19/23
  - ii. Approval of Acton-Boxborough Friends of Music and Acton-Boxborough Friends of Drama to support ABRHS Performing Arts Programs
  - iii. Approval of donation from Town of Littleton/LELD-Littleton Electric Light Dept to Blanchard Elementary playground  
Ben Bloomenthal moved, Vikram Parikh seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED**: to approve the consent agenda as proposed.
- d. Statement of Warrants and Recommendation to Approve 11/2/23 - **VOTE** - *Adam Klein*  
Rebecca Wilson moved, Leela Ramachandran seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED**: to approve the warrants (see motion language in memo).

6. **ADJOURN** (9:00)

Tori Campbell moved, Ben Bloomenthal seconded and it was unanimously,  
**VOTED**: to adjourn the ABRSC meeting at 9:15 p.m.

**FYI** - Community Coffee with Superintendent and Chairperson (virtual), October 30, 2023

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

NEXT MEETINGS: November 16 and December 7 at 7:00 p.m. in the Admin Building Auditorium

List of Documents Used: Agenda, Agenda Item Summary pages, Resolution on Carbon-Neutrality from ABRHS Resource Force 11/2/23 and slides, Early FY25 Budget Projections - Concerns and Guidance Needed Memo from P. Light 10/27/23 and slides, HIT slides from P. Light, AB Budget Subcommittee Schedule FY25, Draft FY25 Budget Guidelines from A. Klein, Draft ABRSC meeting minutes of 10/19/23 from B. Petr, Donation memo for \$10,000 from ABFOM and ABFOD from G. Arsenault 10/17/23, Warrant memo from S. Matthews 10/27/23