

Record of the Marblehead School Committee Meeting

Thursday March 20, 2025

Marblehead High School Library

Members Present: Sarah Fox, Brian Ota, Al Williams, Jennifer Schaeffner

Meeting Opening and Pledge of Allegiance (00:01:00–00:03:00)

- a. Meeting called to order at 6:04 PM, Pledge of Allegiance recited
- b. Student representative absent due to performance; agenda taken out of order for accommodations

Commendations and Student Leadership Council Presentation (00:03:00–00:22:00)

- a. Committee commended track coaches and athletes for purchasing bike for alumnus whose bike broke; motion made by Sarah Fox and seconded by [Name] to send gratitude note passed 5–0, with votes in favor: Alison Taylor, Jennifer Schaeffner, Brian Ota, Sarah Fox, Al Williams
- b. Brown School third-grade Leadership Council presented their program:
 - Students elected by peers after giving speeches to classes
 - Goals include improving school through role modeling, teamwork, and listening
 - Conduct weekly community meetings where grades share learning
 - Created kindness and justice wall and advocated for new stage seating for third graders
- c. Students reported program benefits including improved public speaking, confidence, and problem-solving skills; committee praised presentation and awarded certificates to participants: Harrison, [Name], Maggie, Matthew, Mila, Ruby, and Zara

Meeting Recess and Technical Setup (00:22:00–00:30:00)

- a. Committee recessed for photos with student presenters; meeting resumed at 6:32 PM for public comment
 - Technical issues addressed regarding virtual platform screen sharing and co-host permissions
 - Public comment opened for online and in-person attendees using hand-raising recognition

Public Comment on Flag Policy (00:30:00–01:12:00)

a. Motion made by [Name] and seconded by [Name] to extend public comment beyond the standard 15-minute limit. The motion passed 4–0, with votes in favor: Jennifer Schaeffner, Al Williams, Sarah Fox, Brian Ota, and Alison Taylor noted as having dropped off the meeting.

b. Public opposition to proposed flag policy included:

- Kira Kay questioned why policy unchanged despite community opposition, student demonstrations, and newspaper endorsement of alternatives; cited State Commissioner statement on supporting marginalized students; questioned committee qualifications versus trained educators
- Liv (MHS junior) argued flags serve as symbols of identity and culture; presented survey showing 103 of 109 students believe they should have voice in policy; noted students created alternative policy proposal reviewed by legal advocates
- Margaret Clark questioned legal necessity, noting no lawsuits in hundreds of years until one outsider incident; requested transparency on specific legal language and enforcement procedures

c. Legal and constitutional concerns raised:

- Attorney Brett Steen argued policy based on First Amendment misunderstanding and could expose town to litigation
- Renee Ramirez emphasized clinical importance of symbols for children's development
- Angus warned policy politically motivated and could violate First Amendment petition rights
- Additional speakers (Kathleen Zedegren, Jeannie Lamkin, Henry Glassman, Megan Kaplan) opposed policy citing student leadership, educational freedom, and curriculum interference concerns

District Updates and Antisemitism Investigation (01:12:00–01:31:00)

a. District updates:

- Hadestown performances April 11th-13th
- Nate Assa finished 6th nationwide in 5000 meter race at New Balance National Indoor Track and Field competition
- Aoife Sullivan's documentary "Making Magic and Marble" selected for Salem Film Festival screening
- Nine AP students submitted letters on school start times, three-day weekends, mental health days, and attendance policy

b. METCO program status reported with director Keisha Johnson representing Marblehead at State House advisory day:

- No immediate concerns despite current climate, though potential funding issues may arise
- Main challenge is leadership transition with president and CEO resignations
- Program well-established across 32 communities

c. Antisemitism investigation and committee formation:

- Superintendent participated in Hadassah webinar with ~100 attendees on curriculum review processes
- Anti-discrimination committee created with parents, administrators, teachers, and students focusing on antisemitism
- Committee utilizing resources from local Jewish organizations and rabbis for curriculum review
- Investigation originated from faculty disagreements over flags following October 2023 events, resulting in harsh interactions and teacher departures
- Investigation focused on personnel issues rather than determining if schools were antisemitic
- Superintendent apologized for delays in providing antisemitic situations executive summary and 349-page Academic Discoveries report, noting most identified issues already addressed by current administration

Consent Agenda and Budget Approval (01:31:00–01:37:00)

- a. Meeting minutes postponed (not available for approval); motion by Chair, seconded by Al Williams to approve scheduled bills totaling \$973,745.11 passed 4–0 (votes in favor: Jennifer Schaeffner, Brian Ota, Al Williams, Sarah Fox)
- b. Motion by Brian Ota, seconded by Jennifer Schaeffner to approve FY26 budget of \$49,120,285
- Revenue projections changed significantly in January, allowing level services budget after expected difficulties in fall/winter
 - Budget developed by administrators with superintendent and assistant superintendent of finance, not school committee
 - Motion passed 4–0 (votes in favor: Jennifer Schaeffner, Brian Ota, Al Williams, Sarah Fox)
- c. Remaining timeline: Finance Committee vote March 31st, warrant hearing first week of April, town meeting first Monday/Tuesday of May

DECA Career Development Conference Trip Approval (01:37:00–01:41:00)

- a. Business teacher requested approval for overnight Disney World trip for DECA Career Development Conference

- Five nights for three qualified female students
- Fundraising and grant reduced student costs to airfare and meals only
- Registration fees and lodging covered by fundraising

b. Supervision arrangements confirmed

- Hotel accommodations with two beds and available cots
- Partnership with another school (three male attendees) for shared supervision
- Additional supervision by female DECA advisor from Beverly High School
- Students joining with Father Gabriel Richard High School (two students)

c. A motion was made by Brian Ota and seconded by Jennifer Schaeffner to approve the proposed overnight field trip to DECA Career Development Conference from April 25, 2025 to April 30, 2025. The chair amended the motion to reflect that April 30th would be a travel day, with the conference running through April 29th. The motion passed 4–0, with votes in favor: Jennifer Schaeffner, Brian Ota, Al Williams, Sarah Fox

Flags and Banners Policy First Reading (01:41:00–02:22:00)

a. Policy subcommittee met March 7 to review attorney John Foskett's legal brief and recommended policy

- Additional legal consultation needed before finalizing policy
- Policy based on current Supreme Court law and other Massachusetts districts' approaches

b. Committee member positions and concerns:

- Williams opposed current draft, advocating for student input process and high school administration proposals subject to committee approval
- Ota supported restrictive three-flag limit, citing silent community support and concerns about controversial nature
- Fox referenced 2022 Shurtleff case requiring districts to choose between government speech or allowing all flags, expressed concerns about potential offensive displays
- Interim Superintendent Robidoux supported educational flags with curriculum alignment, emphasized student voice as input not decision-making authority

c. Motion by Sarah Fox, seconded by Brian Ota, to send matter back to subcommittee for attorney clarification on superintendent's role and to consider Williams' suggestions. Motion passed 4–0, with votes in favor: Jennifer Schaeffner, Brian Ota, Al Williams, Sarah Fox.

Superintendent Evaluation Timeline (02:22:00–02:32:00)

a. Timeline discrepancies discussed between chair's recollection and Jennifer Schaeffner's notes

- Chair recalled May 8th workshop date, May 15th vote date
- Schaeffner's notes showed survey deadline May 12th-13th, workshop May 15th, business meeting May 22nd

b. Final agreed timeline established

- May 1st: regular business meeting
- May 8th: off-cycle workshop to develop composite evaluation
- May 15th: regular business meeting to discuss and potentially vote on evaluation
- May 22nd: potential meeting to vote on new contract
- Survey to go out mid-April for 7-10 days to staff, administrators, parents, and community

c. Sarah Fox and Brian Ota (survey subcommittee) will present completed survey compilation at first April meeting for review before release

Subcommittee Updates and Closing Business (02:32:00–02:41:00)

a. Communications subcommittee completed March newsletter and plans survey after three months to evaluate program

- Over 1,000 readers accessed January and February newsletters vs. typical 30 meeting attendees
- Exploring informal meetings with two committee members and community members, potential town hall meetings

b. Finance liaisons met with Finance Committee on revolving funds as budget balancing strategy

- Reviewed fund balances to avoid staff/service reductions
- Assistant Superintendent Pfifferling explained legal restrictions on fund usage

c. Policy subcommittee progressed on operating protocols with input from Alicia Mallon; CPAC secured Unsung Heroes program funding for special education recognition; police chief requested crossing guard recruitment (\$21.33/hour, up to 10 hours)

Meeting adjourned at 8:43 PM