# Minutes of the Regular Meeting

# of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education

# John W. McCormack Building, Ashburton Cafe Conference Room

# 1 Ashburton Place, Plaza Level

# Boston, MA 02108

# May 24, 2022 9:46 a.m. – 2:24 p.m.

**Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Present:**

**Katherine Craven**,Chair,Brookline

**James Morton**, Vice-Chair, Boston

**Amanda** **Fernández**,Belmont

**Matthew Hills**, Newton

**Eleni Carris Livingston**, Wellesley, Student Member

**Darlene Lombos,** Boston

**Michael Moriarty,** Holyoke

**James Peyser**,Secretary of Education

**Paymon Rouhanifard,** Brookline

**Mary Ann Stewart,** Lexington

**Martin West**, Newton

**Jeffrey C. Riley**, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Chair Craven called the meeting to order at 9:46 a.m., and members introduced themselves. Chair Craven noted it has been the custom of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board/BESE) to hold the May meeting at the high school of the student member, but the Board was asked to change the location for today’s meeting, and she apologized for the late notice. Chair Craven noted that today’s meeting, like all open meetings of the Board, is being recorded.

**Statements from the Public**

* **Mayor Michelle Wu** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Senator Lydia Edwards** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Representative Liz Miranda** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Ed Flynn, Boston City Council President,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Michael Flaherty, Boston City Council At-large Member,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Erin Murphy, Boston City Council At-large Member,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Leila Parks, parent and teacher at Boston Public Schools,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Robert Baroz, teacher at Boston Public Schools,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Matthew Ruggiero, teacher at Charlestown High School,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Kendra Lara, Boston City Council At-large Member,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Mary Tamer, Massachusetts State Director, Democrats for Education Reform,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Josiehanna Colon, New Mission High School student, Boston Student Advisory Council representative,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Harneen Chernow, former BESE member,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Margaret McKenna, former BESE Chair,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Danielle Miller, Boston Public Schools parent,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Edith S. Bazile, Executive Director & Founder, Black Advocates for Educational Excellence,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Gabriela Coleta, Boston City Council Member, District 1,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools
* **Ruthzee Louijeune, Boston City Council At-large Member,** addressed the Board on Item 3: Update on Boston Public Schools

Chair Craven thanked the speakers and called for a brief break at 11:20 a.m. The Board resumed its meeting at 11:35 a.m.

**School Counselor of the Year: Tama Lang**

Chair Craven said due to time the Board would move to Item 2 on the agenda, School Counselor of the Year, Tama Lang. Lisa Harney, the liaison from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department/DESE) to the Massachusetts School Counselors Association (MASCA), thanked the Board for recognizing school counselors and the School Counselor of the Year. She introduced MASCA Executive Director Robert Bardwell, who said Ms. Lang exemplifies school counselors who are working hard every day to support their students to be successful.

Ms. Lang said she is humbled and honored to be named the 2022 Massachusetts School Counselor of the Year. She described her role as a counselor at the Sgt. Robert R. Litwin Elementary School in Chicopee for the last 20 years. Ms. Lang said her goal is to offer a comprehensive school counseling program through a tiered approach, and her responsibility is to help all students develop foundational social and emotional learning skills. She added that while her primary focus is on students’ wellbeing, enhancing educator wellness also helps students to thrive. Ms. Lang discussed survey data she has collected from counselors in her district about successes and challenges in their work and responded to questions from Board members. Chair Craven thanked Ms. Lang for her work and her presentation.

Chair Craven said the Board heard from many speakers this morning and exceeded the usual 30-minute public comment period. She proposed that the Board defer agenda items 5 through 8 to a future meeting. There was no objection. The Chair noted that item 8, scheduling of meetings, could be addressed today.

**Proposed Schedule for Regular Board Meetings through June 2023**

Chair Craven asked if members had any issues with the proposed Board meeting schedule for 2022-2023. With none being heard,

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED:  that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approves the schedule of regular meetings through June 2023, as presented by the Commissioner.**

The vote was unanimous.

Chair Craven acknowledged the work that Deputy Commissioner Russell Johnston is leading on the IEP Improvement Project and its potential benefits to students with disabilities and their families. She said the Board looks forward to discussing it at a future meeting. Chair Craven said Ms. Carris Livingston has agreed to present the State Student Advisory Council’s End-of-Year report at the June meeting, and the budget discussion will also be deferred to June. Chair Craven said the Board has received the Commissioner’s written update on action steps to support schools, students, and families, and would now turn to the update on Boston Public Schools and the presentation on supporting students' mental health and wellness.

**Update on Boston Public Schools**

Chair Craven said the follow-up District Review of Boston Public Schools (BPS) has been a major collaborative effort. She noted there is a lot to get through and Commissioner Riley and Rob Curtin, Chief Officer for Data, Assessment, and Accountability, would provide an overview of the report.

Commissioner Riley said he would briefly present his assessment and then Mr. Curtin would walk through the report in greater detail. The Commissioner said he would then offer his views about some of the most pressing needs identified in the report and open it up for Board discussion.

Commissioner Riley said the report is very disheartening, although it recognizes some things that were accomplished under Dr. Cassellius’s leadership, such as approval of a new policy to align BPS graduation requirements to MassCore by 2026. He said there are myriad problems, many emanating from a bloated central office that is often incapable of the most basic functions. Commissioner Riley said the result is that students, especially the most vulnerable students, are being denied the quality of education they deserve.

The Commissioner highlighted six key issues cited in the report:

* safety, noting the frequency and number of incidents
* transportation failures that disrupt student learning
* special education, described as a broken system
* English learner education that fails to deliver what students need
* data reporting with significant concerns about accuracy
* basic facilities issues that remain unaddressed

The Commissioner said it is important that the public understands the serious issues facing the district. He added while he is not making a recommendation or asking for a vote today, the report makes clear that urgent action is required. He said he has been in discussions with the mayor on a path forward and he is seeking assurance that these issues will be addressed even before a new superintendent begins. He emphasized that the mayor did not create this situation, she inherited it, and some of these problems have existed for years. Commissioner Riley said he is hopeful they can work out a path forward, and he stressed the need to address fundamental problems in BPS, especially at the central office. He said the students, teachers, principals, and community deserve better than they are getting.

Mr. Curtin reviewed the historical background of the 2020 BPS District Review report and the BPS-DESE Memorandum of Understanding. He acknowledged the DESE staff who conducted the follow-up district review this spring and American Institutes for Research (AIR), who conducted classroom observations. He summarized the district review process and timeline, noting the six district review standards and associated indicators: Leadership and Governance; Curriculum and Instruction; Student Support; Human Resources and Professional Development; Assessment; and Financial and Asset Management. He noted the report includes strength findings, challenges, and areas for growth relating to each standard and associated indicator if applicable and responded to questions from Board members.

Mr. Moriarty commented that under Student Support, the report states that the “district’s system for managing, responding to, and resolving complaints is not responsive to parent and guardian concerns; does not support the physical, social, and emotional well-being of all students; and does not ensure a safe environment for all students.” He said in his view, this should be the headline. Mr. Moriarty read briefly from an article interviewing a parent in another district whose child died by suicide related to bullying. He said the 49,000 students in the Boston Public Schools need to have their safety protected.

Ms. Carris Livingston commented that the transportation problems affect student safety as well as access to instruction. She said not only is this a serious issue of equity, but it is also hazardous for young children to be waiting at a bus stop for a bus that is late or never arrives. She said she views the physical safety of children as a fundamental concern.

Chair Craven proposed that the Board hear the presentation by the students from the State Student Advisory Council/Greater Boston Regional Student Advisory Council relative to agenda Item 4: Supporting Students' Mental Health and Wellness and then return to the BPS discussion.

**Supporting Students' Mental Health and Wellness**

Chair Craven introduced Vivian Ye, Co-Chair, senior at Commonwealth School in Boston,

Shyun Moon, junior from Newton North High School, and Haruka Nabeshima, Newton North High School. Ms. Ye outlined the goals and purpose of the State Student Advisory Council (SSAC) Greater Boston Regional Student Advisory Council (GBRSAC) and its Health and Wellness work group. She noted this presentation is the culmination of a three-year project that started in the 2019-2020 school year. Ms. Ye described the student survey the group conducted with about 500 students responding, a majority of whom reported struggling with mental health issues.

Ms. Moon summarized survey findings relative to school support for students, student workload, and the importance of a healthy school environment. She noted that the survey suggests schools should actively promote social and mental health resources, provide suggestion boxes/Google forms for students to share what would be most helpful to them (with the option for anonymity), and strongly encourage students to meet with guidance counselors on a regular basis to build supportive relationships.

Ms. Nabeshima reviewed the survey results relative to sleep and health risks associated with insufficient sleep, levels of daily stress students reported, and time management and organization. She concluded with an overview of recommendations based on the survey results, which include encouraging students to access guidance counselors and other supportive adults in school; checking in with students regularly about how they are doing/feeling; informing students of upcoming assignments so they can plan ahead; creating a safe space for students to talk about academic and social stress; and actively promoting mental health and academic support resources for students.

Ms. Carris Livingston commended the presenters and said she is proud of the work the GBRSAC has accomplished with this three-year project: conducting the survey, compiling the data, and producing thoughtful recommendations. Chair Craven thanked the presenters.

Chair Craven presented Ms. Carris Livingston with a resolution from State Senator Cynthia Stone Creem and Representative Alice Peisch, honoring Ms. Carris Livingston’s service to students and to the Commonwealth. Chair Craven said the Board will continue to celebrate Ms. Carris Livingston and her exemplary service.

**Update on Boston Public Schools (continued)**

Chair Craven returned the Board’s attention to the BPS topic. Commissioner Riley said we need the mayor to assure a systematic improvement plan that addresses urgent issues identified in the report, including a system to handle parent complaints promptly; a safety audit; on-time transportation with no uncovered routes; filling the leadership void in special education, adopting policies and procedures, and reducing use of substantially separate classes; strengthening EL services; producing accurate and reliable data, noting that DESE would pay for a data auditor; and a comprehensive facilities plan. Commissioner Riley said the situation is urgent and he will come back to the Board soon with an update.

Vice-Chair Morton asked about the timeline. Commissioner Riley said he is hoping they can get something done within the next week or so. He added that he is deferring academic achievement goals until the new superintendent comes in, while looking for assurance from the mayor that work on these important basic functions will begin right away.

Chair Craven asked if anything prevents the City of Boston from addressing these issues now. Commissioner Riley said nearly every city and town in Massachusetts has these essentials covered. He added he believes the mayor is serious about improving the schools and he is looking for her commitment to making these things a priority. Commissioner Riley said there is no impediment from the state or lack of resources that would prevent this from happening.

Mr. Moriarty commented on school facilities issues and the City’s interaction with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). He said he would urge that any facilities work by the City should be done with the MSBA, which provides highly skilled technical assistance and transparency.

Mr. Hills said this report is not about the mayor or her commitment but about things that are not getting done. Mr. Hills said academic performance in BPS is poor apart from the exam schools, and for English learners and special education students, it is comprehensively poor. He said the data inaccuracies and broad structural problems at BPS are very troubling. Mr. Hills said if the negotiations do not lead to a high level of confidence that the arrangement will lead to change, then he would support receivership. Commissioner Riley said he has made no decision and intends to take the best path forward in the interest of the students of Boston.

Secretary Peyser said public schools in the Commonwealth are a shared responsibility between state and local government. He said the state’s role is to provide equitable resources plus standards, assessments, technical assistance, and oversight/compliance monitoring, and the state is authorized and expected to take action when there is a pattern of significant noncompliance or persistent underperformance. Secretary Peyser added no one is questioning the need for improvement but unfortunately there has been little evidence of progress over many years and administrations. The Secretary said Boston is one of the highest resourced districts in the state and one of the highest spending urban districts in the country. He said this work is challenging and it is not about the skills or efforts of Boston educators, but about systemic issues that need to be addressed. Secretary Peyser said we need to face facts without defensiveness, do what is best for students, and respond constructively with a sense of urgency. He thanked the mayor for engaging productively in discussions.

Ms. Lombos voiced her support for the Commissioner taking time to seek a partnership and work with the new leadership in Boston.

Ms. Carris Livingston said as the student representative on the Board, she wants to communicate that the failures of the system do not mean that students or teachers are failing. She said she sees this as a fight for the students, to address things that are unfair to them and outside their control, and they do not have years to wait. Ms. Carris Livingston said she is concerned about the community opposition to receivership, adding that school is about relationships, and it is not productive to fracture relationships. She said she hopes the adults will center the discussion around what is best for the students.

Vice-Chair Morton thanked Ms. Carris Livingston, Secretary Peyser, and other members for their comments. He said the universal theme he heard today is that there needs to be a plan to address urgent core needs and he trusts the Commissioner’s judgment about working with the mayor in a collaborative spirit to benefit the students. Vice-Chair Morton added that receivership is a tool if this cannot be done through partnership, but he is banking on a collaborative plan.

Ms. Stewart suggested Boston should have a public facilities director who could stay on top of maintenance and other issues. She acknowledged the many emails Board members have received over the last few months and noted the need for collaboration and engagement. Ms. Stewart said she does not minimize the issues outlined in the report but noted that only four sentences in the report mentioned the impact of the pandemic.

Mr. Rouhanifard said there is broad agreement on the challenges identified in the report and he believes that is a good foundation to work on. He added that these challenges are connected to and rooted in decades of institutional racism, creating a very steep mountain to climb. Mr. Rouhanifard said politics and bureaucracies have inhibited progress, and it is essential to focus on the long game for the benefit of the students. He said whether the work is led by the state, the city, or done in partnership, it has to create space for a leader to come in and put in the hard work to implement the changes over time. Mr. Rouhanifard added that nothing is more disenfranchising than a high school graduate who is unprepared.

Ms. Fernández thanked the Department for the thorough report and thanked the members of the Board and the speakers who provided public comment. She said the Commissioner’s list for systemic improvement focuses on issues that must be addressed quickly, and she hopes all stakeholders can also come together around a long-term plan for BPS that is transformative, because what has been done in the past has not worked for all students.

Commissioner Riley thanked Mr. Curtin and his team for putting together this report and thanked the Board for the discussion. Chair Craven said it is essential for the district to provide accurate and timely data and this issue needs to be addressed as soon as possible. The Commissioner concurred.

**On a motion duly made and seconded, it was:**

**VOTED: that the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adjourn the meeting at 2:24 p.m., subject to the call of the Chair.**

The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey C. Riley

Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

and Secretary to the Board