NEW SALEM/WENDELL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
Thursday, October 1, 2026
Final Minutes

Present: Nancy Slator, Barbara Doyle, Mandy Blackbird, Kate Woodward, Molly Rapp, Steven Blinder, members; Anna Wetherby, Chair; Kelley Sullivan, Principal; Caitlin Anderson May, Director of Finance and Operations; Shannon Cleveland, Superintendent; SREA Representative; Public Guests.

1. Call to Order: Anna called the meeting to order at 7:01 P.M.

2. Public Comment:

   Anna invited public comment; there was none.

3. Warrants and Gifts:

- **Warrants**
  - Accounts Payable Union 28

2807	9/14/2026	$2,935.28
2808	9/28/2026	$412.00

  - Accounts Payable Swift River

4010	9/14/2026	$372.25
4011	9/14/2026	$357,189.04
4012	9/28/2026	$1,245.46
4013	9/28/2026	$2,101.02

  - Payroll Swift River

406	9/10/2026	$92,355.57
407	9/24/26	$93,747.03

  - Payroll Union 28

806	9/10/2026	$31,475.01
807	9/24/2026	$31,475.01

  - Monthly Deductions

8060	9/10/2026	$98,871.14
8070	9/24/2026	$100,256.58

a. Gifts: Acceptance Vote: None.

b. Grants: Acceptance Vote: None

4. Superintendent's Report:

Shannon reported that it's been a long month. Things are underway at all the schools. We've had our Common Jobs meeting where U#28 staff can meet and collaborate in their various roles. The DESE data has become unembargoed and we're diving into all of that.

SRS staff and students have completed the first in a line of safety trainings coordinated and facilitated in partnership with the Franklin County Sherriff's Dept. The CNC Advisory Council held its first meeting, and under the direction of Gillian Budine, we'll be renaming CNC in order to help families find these resources in multiple communities (this is a state initiative). We're grateful for all the programs facilitated through this center.

Our community event *Building Skills to Support Your Child* has been rescheduled.

Finally, Shannon is working with other Superintendents to ask DESE for a paper-and-pencil option for MCAS as a way to help reduce screen time for young children, which is a DESE goal. The test is currently computer based, so even young children need to work on screens to prepare for that format. The research DESE is promoting is not aligned with current MCAS practice. Our advocacy won't change things for this spring, but perhaps next year. DESE is open to having this conversation, which is just starting.

5. Director of Finance and Operations Report:

Caitlin explained she gave a presentation at JSC on how to read an End of Year Report. They're dense documents. Next, we need a vote to allow the Chair to sign the certification form for the End of Year Report. The certification page just states that to the best of the Chair's knowledge, the information presented is correct. We can also make amendments after if there are inconsistencies or mistakes. (Caitlin will work with Anna to use DocuSign for this.)

Mandy moved to allow the Chair to sign the EOY Certification Page.
Barbara seconded.
Voice vote all ayes.

a. NS/W Expenditure Report: Caitlin said Sept is very early and there are grants still coming in, so she's making changes to the report as we get more information. We know that as we incorporate new technologies and platforms, there are some additional costs that are minor, but we might go over that line this year and should adjust next year. Anna asked about any building conditions we might want to be aware of. Kelley said we got a quote for outlets that really need replacing ($2K). We talked about computer upgrades as well, but no quote for that yet. It's time to seal the driveway, and she'll bring that to the next meeting ($13K). The chip seal was a good choice since it's lasted 8 years and is only starting to wear now.

b. NS/W Union 28 Expenditure Report: No report.

6. Principal's Report:

Kelley reported we've had a busy Sept. The PTCA was here last Friday with cold brew coffee and books for every teacher in the building in celebration of Dolly Parton Day on Sept 25. They're working on a Cultural Council grant to bring a planetarium to SRS. The Run Club is starting with some laps at the beginning of school, and we celebrate them every other week at Community Sing.

As for the PA system that needs replacing, we've been lucky to find a local company that can replace our amplifier, which we'll be moving forward with immediately. Norseman out of Northampton has also given us a bid to update our speakers, which has come in less than anticipated (under $10K).

Our fall data meetings took place. Staff reviewed student assessment data, including MCAS results, and discussed differences in performance across grades. We'll be spending next Weds afternoon looking at MCAS questions and aligning them with our curriculum. It's clear that using a computer doesn't give our students their best scores. The open answer questions do have AI corrections that we don't necessarily agree with. Some students are scoring really high, others less so. They're not that interested in participating, so we're wondering how to motivate them. Families have to motivate their students as well. It's not a graduation requirement anymore, but it is a requirement for us. We received no points for attendance last year, which is something we're struggling with. Some families are taking students out to attend nature schools in the area, and some students have already missed 10 days of school. That's an issue for us, although those are terrific programs. We face this attendance issue all the time and need to address it as best we can.

Kate asked about the nature / outdoor programs: A lot of homeschoolers use them. One is in Deerfield and one is here in Wendell. Nancy asked what the state will do to us? We get scores for achievement and growth, then attendance is factored into those and our final scores are compared with the rest of the districts in the state. Families look at those scores and use them as a ranking metric for schools. The data can be used for a variety of things by the state, but it's just one data point; it doesn't tell the whole story of what goes on at a school. It's valuable data to reflect on, but there's a lot more to look at. Shannon doesn't believe in high-stakes testing and believes it's just one measure of student ability and achievement. It can point out in an objective way areas for growth and areas of excellence. Nancy said if she's a parent being told her student not doing well on the test is hurting the school, she'd care about that. It's not more money for your school; it doesn't hurt a school in that way. But many parents look at those scores and make enrollment decisions based on them. This impacts the flow of School Choice students, for example, and that can be very impactful for a small, rural school. Mandy said schools can be identified for targeted assistance by DESE as well. That impacts what you can do at your own school. Shannon emphasized that the data says if a student is missing significant days, they're missing out on their development and education. The students who opt out are given scores of 0 from the state, so that's an impact too.

Anna asked if there was any reason the SC should see recent MCAS data. Kelley said she'll be comparing with last year's data. SC members expressed an interest in seeing that. Kelley said it's important to understand the data includes a fruit salad of comparisons (apples to oranges to pears to…). And the differences can be so stark from year to year. The open response scores are done by AI, and we receive them after we can see what the kids wrote, after the discrepancy window closes. So we can't challenge those discrepancies when we disagree with the AI score. Shannon added that cohorts have strengths and weaknesses, and we don't need MCAS to know that already (our teachers are well aware).

Kelley said if anyone knows someone who wants to drive a school bus or do substitute teaching, send them our way. We're stretched quite thing with the loss of five staff memers and one team member covering a maternity leave. This loss of staff has been challenging for all of us. Every day feels like a game of Jenga in terms of balancing our classroom coverage and meeting student needs. Also, changes in bus routes and loss

of bus drivers regionally has made our transportation needs quite serious. Applications for substitute teachers are on the SRS website.

Some exciting events are coming up like Pinwheels for Peace, Custodian Day, Open House (Oct 8), the muti band field trip (a collab with Shutesbury Elementary), and towards the end of the month, Track or Treat (a spaghetti dinner fundraiser). Enrollment stands at 140.

Anna confirmed that homeschooling applications are no longer approved by local SCs.

7. Committee Reports:

a. Report from Mahar Representatives:

Kate reported that the year got off to a great start, with 14 new staff members, including an SRS alum (Thor Mead), who's a Math para. The Curriculum Director provided a review of the very successful summer program. She'll ask for the slide presentation to share. The Fish and Game Club was given approval for a trip to Yellowstone in June, and the Outdoor Club was approved for an overnight hike near Mt. Wachussett. There are two new projects there. The Mahar Dining Club (where senior citizens come to eat in a designated space, supported by Meals on Wheels and Lifepath; Wendell and New Salem senior citizens can all participate) on T,W, and Th, with pre-registration required through the Council on Aging. Students in the Life Skills program support the seniors and clean up. Mahar is working with the YMCA on providing space for Preschool for children in area Towns and staff children; they're working on rooms to bring them up to code based on YMCA policies. Possibly starting in January at the earliest. Kelley noted there were several PK-3 and PK-4 children we couldn't get in. The Regional Agreement Committee is meeting now.

Nancy is on that committee, and it hasn't been a smooth start for her (confusion over schedule).

b. Collaborative for Educational Services: No report. The committee is meeting monthly now.

c. Budget and Personnel: No report.

Next Meeting: Tuesday, October 13, 2026 @ 6:00 p.m.

d. Joint Supervisory:

Anna noted we're moving back to a Monday meeting. Barbara reported that we had to wait for a while to achieve quorum. Kate asked if anyone from SCs can attend: yes, but if you're not a voting member of JSC, it won't count toward quorum. But it's a public meeting, so you can just go regardless. Links are usually posted on Town websites. Mandy said the biggest topic of discussion was the expiration of U#28 contracts this year, all of which need to be renegotiated. This was not intentional; the cycles just coincided. This will have budget implications, as well as Principal contracts. B&P might meet more frequently this year to conduct those negotiations.

Next Meeting: Monday, November 16, 2026 @ 7:00 p.m.

8. October Items:

a. Family Handbook - Discussion and Vote: Molly offered a potential correction to times (making sure dismissal is accurate). Also, she suggested updating the parent involvement page with

information about the Wellness Committee. Shannon said we still need to approve the Wellness Policy. Molly just wanted to add that to the list of committees parents could be involved in.

Mandy moved to approve the Family Handbook as presented..
Kate seconded.
Voice vote all ayes.

9. Next Meeting Dates:

New Salem/Wendell Policy Committee – Thursday, November 5, 2026 – 6:30 p.m.
New Salem/Wendell School Committee – Thursday, November 5, 2026 – 7:00 p.m.

10. Policies to be Reviewed: None.

11. Approval of Minutes:

Mandy moved to approve the minutes of September 3, 2026.
Barbara seconded.
Voice vote all ayes.

12. Adjournment:

Mandy moved to adjourn at 7:49 P.M.
Kate seconded.
Voice vote all ayes.