



Notes

Jan 16, 2025

Meeting Jan 16, 2025 at 19:02 EST

Meeting records  Transcript  Recording

Summary

The meeting focused on addressing the resignation of Deputy Superintendent Liza O'Connell and its impact on student services, including delayed contracts and unpaid bills. Participants expressed concerns about financial mismanagement, a hostile work environment, and the lack of transparency and accountability within the district. The school committee outlined plans for an external management audit to address these issues, a timeline to finalize service contracts by January, and a commitment to greater community involvement in the hiring process for a new deputy superintendent.

Details

- **Deputy Superintendent Resignation and Service Issues** The meeting addressed concerns surrounding the resignation of the Deputy Superintendent of Student Services (OSS), Liza O'Connell, and its impact on services. Participants discussed the lack of services provided to students and the unpaid bills owed to providers. They discussed the hiring process for a new deputy superintendent and the need to address concerns about a hostile work environment.
- **Addressing Financial Mismanagement and Hostile Work Environment** The school committee acknowledged concerns about financial mismanagement and a hostile work environment expressed in Liza O'Connell's resignation letter. They outlined a plan to address these issues through a management audit by an external firm. The audit will investigate the district's compliance with legal obligations, communication breakdowns between offices, and the drivers of increased spending.

- Timeline for Resolving Service Issues and Hiring a New Deputy** The school committee stated that the goal is to have all service contracts executed by the end of January. They are working on hiring a new deputy superintendent, but a timeline for the process is not yet established. The school committee also discussed the possibility of appointing an interim deputy to ensure a smooth transition.
- Transparency and Community Involvement in Hiring Process** There was a discussion about the lack of transparency surrounding the hiring process for the deputy superintendent. The school committee promised to involve SEPAC in the process and to communicate updates regularly. They acknowledged the need to engage with families and to ensure that the new deputy has a plan for outreach and collaboration.
- Organizational Culture and Addressing Root Causes** The conversation touched upon the need to improve the overall working culture within the district, particularly in central office. The committee acknowledged that they had limited power to force change, but they highlighted the importance of understanding the issues leading to the resignation of Liza O'Connell. They emphasized the need for transparency and communication.
- CPAC Updates and School Committee Engagement** Jesse Hefter proposed that SEPAC be given a scheduled opportunity to present updates to the school committee at least once a year. This would provide a platform for constructive dialogue and allow the committee to address concerns directly.
- Audit Scope and Qualifications of the Firm** Concerns were raised about the scope of the audit, particularly the focus on the relationship between OSS and OAF. Participants questioned the lack of a forensic accounting audit and the qualifications of the chosen firm. The school committee defended their decision to focus on OSS and OAF, explaining that these areas were of most concern. They also stated the firm was chosen for its speed and expertise.
- Contract Delays and Provider Payment** Participants discussed the delays in processing contracts and paying providers. One participant raised concerns about her daughter's provider not being paid despite her contract being signed over a month ago. They questioned the Superintendent's commitment to paying all outstanding bills by the end of the month, as it appeared there was a significant backlog in the process. Jesse Hefter clarified that the payment process required multiple steps, including creating a purchase order and

assigning it to a budget line item. Despite this, they remained hopeful that all payments would be made by the end of the month.

- **Reimbursement for Parent Payments** One participant raised concerns about providers requiring parents to pay for services, as contracts are not finalized. They sought assurance that parents would be reimbursed if they had to pay for services.
- **Financial Auditing** Participants discussed the lack of a fiscal audit and whether the district had the funds to cover outstanding bills. Concerns were raised about whether there was misappropriation of funds, given the lack of oversight and transparency. They criticized the district's approach to financial management and questioned the lack of accountability.
- **Superintendent Oversight and Accountability** The discussion centered on the role of the superintendent in addressing the financial and operational challenges facing the school district. Participants expressed frustration with the lack of transparency and accountability from the superintendent, citing instances of circular answers and lack of responsiveness. They questioned his commitment to ensuring that providers are paid and that services are delivered to students.
- **Impact of Staff Departures** Participants expressed concerns about the potential for further staff departures, given the uncertainties surrounding the district's financial situation and the recent resignation of a key administrator. They acknowledged the cascading effects that these departures would have on student services and the district's ability to attract and retain qualified staff.
- **SEPAC Advocacy and Communication** Participants emphasized the importance of communication and advocacy from families in addressing the issues facing the district. They agreed to share information and concerns with school committee members, and encouraged families to contact them directly.
- **SEPAC Planning and Future Meetings** SEPAC leadership discussed plans for their next meeting and future topics, including a follow-up meeting to discuss the progress made in addressing the financial and service delivery issues. They also discussed the need for a more proactive and collaborative approach to engaging with the district leadership.
- **Superintendent Search and Interview Committee** Participants discussed the concerns surrounding the superintendent search process and the lack of representation from SEPAC on the interview committee. They felt that the

superintendent should not be the sole screener of candidates, and that SEPAC should have a voice in the process.

- **Advocate Feedback and District Collaboration** Participants acknowledged the importance of seeking input from advocates and other stakeholders in neighboring districts about best practices for superintendent search processes and service delivery. They lamented the lack of collaboration and responsiveness from the district, and expressed concern about the negative impact this is having on students and families.
- **Meeting Recap** The meeting participants discussed the recent SEPAC meeting and various issues related to special education services and funding in Brookline. They discussed the need for better communication and coordination among stakeholders.
- **Financial Processes** Margo Jones raised questions about the financial processes for special education services and the challenges of obtaining funds for needed services. D. Perry explained that while there are processes for requesting and issuing checks, special education is exempt from certain procurement requirements. They emphasized the importance of having a budget manager in place to effectively manage resources.
- **Budgetary Flexibility** D. Perry stated that special education is exempt from certain procurement processes, but that this does not mean the PSB can't have their own steps in the process.
- **Financial Audit** D. Perry stressed the importance of a financial audit to ensure that line items in the budget are properly funded.
- **Budgetary Challenges** Margot Jones raised a hypothetical scenario involving a speech therapist being absent for an extended period, highlighting the challenges of managing budget changes when temporary contracted services are required.

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