

WALTHAM SCHOOL COMMITTEE
Waltham, Massachusetts
REGULAR MEETING

MINUTES

APRIL 8, 2026

The regular meeting of the Waltham School Committee convened at 5:37pm. Present were Ms. Wong-Bigelow, Ms. DeJoannis, Mrs. AlJammal, Mrs. Coleman, and Mr. Zanghi. Mr. Tarallo and Mayor McCarthy were not present. Mrs. Coleman presided.

RECESS

VOTED: On motion of Ms. Wong-Bigelow, seconded by Ms. DeJoannis, to move to Executive Session at 5:37pm to conduct strategy sessions with respect to collective bargaining with the WSSA and / or to conduct negotiations with the WSSA; to conduct strategy sessions with respect to collective bargaining with the WSAA and / or to conduct negotiations with the WSAA; to conduct strategy sessions with respect to collective bargaining with the Waltham School MIS Technicians and / or to conduct negotiations with the Waltham School MIS Technicians; to conduct strategy sessions with respect to collective bargaining with the Waltham School Department Food Service Workers and / or conduct negotiations with the Waltham School Department Food Service Workers; to conduct strategy sessions with respect to collective bargaining with the Waltham School Building Trades, and to conduct strategy sessions in preparation for negotiations with nonunion personnel and / or to conduct negotiations with nonunion personnel - Assistant Superintendent for Special Education and Student Services, to include Attorney Jonathan Atwater, HR Administrator Kate Peretz, and Superintendent Dr. Marisa Mendonsa, and return to the regular meeting at 7:00 pm. All in favor.

RECONVENE

The School Committee reconvened at 7:03pm. Present were Mr. Tarallo, Mr. Zanghi, Mrs. Coleman, Mrs. AlJammal, Ms. DeJoannis, Ms. Wong-Bigelow, and Mayor McCarthy. Mayor McCarthy presided.

Mr. Tarallo led the Committee in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mayor McCarthy announced the meeting was being recorded by WCAC. No one else confirmed they were recording the meeting.

PUBLIC HEARING
ON STATE SCHOOL
CHOICE
PARTICIPATION

Mayor McCarthy opened the Public Hearing on State School Choice Participation at 7:04pm and asked if anyone in attendance wished to address the School Committee. A special education advocate from Attleboro, Joey Ford, spoke in favor of the State's School Choice Program as it provides additional opportunities for children within Special Education to succeed. No one else requested to speak at the hearing.

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to close the Public Hearing on State School Choice Participation at 7:05pm. All in favor.

RECONVENE

The School Committee reconvened at 7:06pm. Present were Mr. Tarallo, Mr. Zanghi, Mrs. Coleman, Mrs. AlJammal, Ms. DeJoannis, Ms. Wong-Bigelow, and Mayor McCarthy. Mayor McCarthy presided.

PUBLIC INPUT

Waltham resident and Valor High Teacher Melissa Chen expressed her concern with the recent discussion about the possible shift from Valor High School to an alternative program. She indicated that, so far, the model has proven to be successful and at the end of this year, will graduate another twenty-two students who, most likely, would not have had the same outcome at Waltham High. She expressed frustration that the reason for this shift seems to be driven by an attempt to reduce the dropout rate at Waltham High. In addition to the hard work and dedication of the staff to use evidence based tiered interventions to support students, she cited the WPY Community Impact Award the school received last year as additional evidence of the school's success. She requested the administration have discussions with Valor staff before final decisions are made.

Attleboro resident and special education advocate, Joey Ford, attempted to speak. Mayor McCarthy confirmed Public Input is for Waltham residents only but gave him an opportunity to speak. He reiterated his work as an advocate and has seen online criticism of the Waltham Public Schools Special Education Dept. He indicated he can help people open investigations into processes not being followed and services not being provided by the district. Mr. Tarallo declared a Point of Order and Mayor McCarthy informed Mr. Ford that he technically was not allowed to address the Committee, however, she gave him an opportunity but he cannot reference the possibility of litigation and advised he needed to conclude his message. He quickly announced people can find out more information by researching Parent Data Force.

**STUDENT COUNCIL
STUDENT INPUT**

Waltham High School student John McCalla announced that spring sports are underway, Waltham High will have performances of The Laramie Project next week, and third quarter grades close next week.

**SCHOOL
COUNCIL/PTO/
SEPAC/BELPAC
INPUT**

There was no one present from these groups who requested to speak with the Committee.

CONSENT AGENDA

Superintendent Dr. Mendonsa presented the following Consent Agenda items:

- Minutes from the Regular Meeting held on March 18, 2026;

Resignations:

- John Barnes, Principal, Waltham High School - effective 06/30/2026;
- Luca Tiezzi, Teacher, Kennedy Middle School - effective 04/10/2026;
- Renata De Castro Costa, Paraprofessional, Waltham High School - effective 04/06/2026;
- Rubilia Valenzuela Zavala, 3.5 hr Food Service, Kennedy Middle School - effective 04/02/2026

Dr. Mendonsa shared two donations: a \$1,000. donation from the Waltham Community Foundation to the Waltham Fine and Performing Arts Department to help support students interested in private music lessons, and a donation of five Supply-A-Teacher Kits from Kids in Need Foundation to Northeast Elementary School. The kits are valued at approximately \$1,250.

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to approve the Consent Agenda. All in favor.

COMMUNICATIONS

- a) Out-of-State Travel request
- A request was submitted from WHS Quiz Bowl Advisor Reba Tierney asking for permission to take six members of the Quiz Bowl team to the NAQT National Tournament in Atlanta, GA over Memorial Day weekend. The group has been fundraising to offset costs.
- VOTED:** On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to approve the WHS Quiz Bowl Team's request to travel out-of-state to Atlanta, GA to attend the NAQT National Tournament in May. All in favor.
- b) Staff out of district request for the 2026 - 2027 school year
- Dr. Mendonsa indicated that a staff member, living outside of Waltham, is requesting that her child attend elementary school in Waltham for the upcoming school year.
- VOTED:** On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mrs. AlJammal, to approve the staff's out of district request for the 2026 - 2027 school year. All in favor.
- c) State School Choice Participation
- Dr. Mendonsa recommended the School Committee vote again to not participate in the State's School Choice program. The financial impact to WPS would be greater than the financial contribution from the state and the district's focus needs to remain on its own students. Mr. Tarallo also expressed his disagreement with participating in the School Choice Program.
- VOTED:** On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to not approve the district's participation in the State School Choice Program. All in favor.
- VOTED:** On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to add items 5d and 5e to the agenda. All in favor.
- d) Schedule a Public Hearing to discuss the renaming of Northeast Elementary School for former WPS Superintendent John J. Daddona
- Mayor McCarthy advised a request was received from Margaret Cannon to rename Northeast Elementary School for former Waltham Public Schools' Superintendent John J. Daddona, who recently passed away. The Licenses & Franchises Committee of the Waltham City Council requested the School Committee consider Ms. Cannon's request and provide its recommendation. The Mayor believes a Public Hearing should be held to solicit feedback from the community.
- Multiple questions were asked about whether the Public Hearing would be open to the whole city or just the Northeast community, whether School Committee Policy FF factors into the decision, and who would pay for the affiliated name change costs if this is approved. The Mayor confirmed the Public Hearing will be open to all residents, the City's code supersedes the School Committee's policy, and the city would cover any name change expenses.
- VOTED:** On motion of Ms. Wong-Bigelow, seconded by Ms. DeJoannis, to hold a Public Hearing regarding the request to rename Northeast Elementary School for former WPS Superintendent John J. Daddona. All in favor.

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. AlJammal, to hold the Public Hearing on Wednesday, May 6th, prior to the School Committee's Regular Meeting. All in favor.

e) Compliance Certification for Northeast Elementary School

The School Committee Chair advised the members that a certification is required to be completed and signed as part of the process for Northeast Elementary to obtain a new roof with MSBA assistance.

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Ms. Wong-Bigelow, to authorize Mayor McCarthy to execute the Massachusetts School Building Authority's Initial Compliance Certification for Northeast Elementary School, as Chair of the Waltham School Committee. All in favor.

SUPERINTENDENT'S UPDATE

a) Miscellaneous Personnel

New Hires:

- Juliana Arruda, Substitute Teacher, District-Wide - effective 03/27/2026;
- Cassandra Dean, Substitute Secretary, District-Wide - effective 03/30/2026;
- Kennedy Walsh, Substitute Teacher, District-Wide - effective 04/06/2026

Transfers and Promotions:

- Rough Indji Derifond, Building Maintenance Person, Waltham High School - effective 03/23/2026;
- Laura Peterson, 6th Grade ELA Teacher, McDevitt Middle School - effective 03/16/2026;
- Fatma Unal, Building Sub, MacArthur Elementary School - effective 03/11/2026;
- Ni Ketut Perawati, 5.5 hr Cafe Worker, Waltham High School - effective 03/16/2026;
- Abigail Westlund, Kindergarten Teacher, Plympton Elementary School - effective 08/31/2026;
- Kyra Laffey, LTS Grade 7 Social Studies, Kennedy Middle School - effective 03/09/2026-03/30/2026

b) Information

There was no additional information shared.

c) Monthly District Enrollment

The district's enrollment continues to remain stable and currently sits at 5,640 students.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

There was nothing new shared in Curriculum and Instruction.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

a) MSBA - Waltham High School Project

The lengthy close-out process continues with the MSBA and OPM.

- b) Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Both working groups met earlier this week and are preparing to share a presentation with the School Committee in June.
- c) Dual Language School Model and Reutilization of 617 Lexington Street The 617 Committee will convene for its next meeting next Monday and is working on a draft plan for recommended uses of the building. A presentation will be made to the Executive Team in the upcoming weeks and then to the School Committee in June.
- Mr. Tarallo asked about giving the building a more formal name now that the high school has moved across the street and the nickname has become simply "617". A short discussion followed and Mayor McCarthy confirmed the renaming of any building is handled by the City Council. Dr. Mendonsa suggested "The Daddona Campus" for the 617 Lexington Street building.
- d) Waltham High School's Career and Technical Education (CTE) Department The CTE lottery was held in mid-March and students who were accepted or waitlisted for specific programs were notified and meetings are ongoing with CTE staff.
- Mr. Tarallo asked how many students are on program waitlists and Ms. Wong-Bigelow inquired about programs with low enrollment. Mayor McCarthy requested an update on when the public spaces will be open to the public. Dr. Mendonsa confirmed she will share this information in the upcoming weeks.
- e) Waltham High School Schedule The Committee is working on scheduling meetings for after April break to further discuss the high school schedule.
- f) Reapproval of the 2026-2027 Waltham Public Schools District Calendar Dr. Mendonsa reminded the members that the 2026-2027 district calendar was previously approved back in the fall; however, the recently settled contract with the WEA has led to some changes. Convocation for staff will be held on August 31st. On September 1st, all staff will have a full day of Professional Development and the first day of school for students in grades 1-12 will be Wednesday, September 2nd. Given multiple days are needed to complete kindergarten screening, the first day of PreK and Kindergarten will now be September 10th. Additionally, the early release day originally taking place in April will shift to May; graduation for Waltham High and Valor High will now be June 13th, and the last day of school, now a half day, will be Monday, June 21st (assuming there are no snow days).
- Dr. Mendonsa also advised that later in the spring, a survey will be sent to families and staff for their input in some possible changes for the 2027-2028 school year.
- Ms. Wong-Bigelow referenced the shaded early release day box in the April calendar needs to be moved to May to reflect the date change. Additionally, she stated she received a request from a parent asking that all Judeo-Christian holidays be removed from the school calendar as the occasional days off cause too much disruption for students.
- Multiple members raised questions or shared opinions about the last day being a half day, lack of substitutes on religious holidays, the tight timeframe for seniors between the last day of school and graduation, the changes per the recent WEA / SC contract, and the upcoming calendar survey for the '27-'28 year. Dr. Mendonsa addressed

each question and confirmed there is sufficient time for seniors to complete classes, final exams and have senior activities, all prior to graduation. Additionally, since grade books are electronic, submitting final grades should not be a problem.

VOTED: On motion of Ms. Wong-Bigelow, seconded by Ms. DeJoannis, to approve the revised '26-'27 school calendar with the color revisions to the April and May early release days and the Juneteenth holiday. Roll call: Mr. Zanghi - yes; Mr. Tarallo - no; Mrs. Coleman - no, Mrs. AlJammal - no; Ms. DeJoannis - yes, and Ms. Wong-Bigelow - yes. **The motion did not pass.*

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to table the reapproval of the 2026-2027 Waltham Public Schools District Calendar to the April 15, 2026 meeting. All in favor.

g) Summer 2026 Meeting dates

The Committee submitted its availability and the recommendation is to hold July's School Committee meeting on Thursday, July 9th. In August, there are four dates that work for the members: August 5th, August 6th, August 11th and August 12th.

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to schedule the Committee's summer meetings on July 9th at 6:00pm and August 12th at 6:00pm. All in favor.

NEW BUSINESS

a) Annual Vote on State School Choice Participation

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to not participate in the State's School Choice program for the upcoming school year. All in favor.

b) Valor High School

Mayor McCarthy shared her frustration with the district not receiving credit from DESE for students enrolled at Valor High and believes this was not accurately disclosed in prior conversations when Valor was being created. She acknowledged dropout rates have always been an issue raised by Mr. Tarallo. Mr. Tarallo added that Valor was designed to reengage and recapture students at risk of dropping out of a traditional high school.

The Mayor asked if Valor High is open to all Waltham High students, if there is a referral process, and whether students are notified when there is an opening at Valor. Dr. Mendonsa confirmed there is a process at Waltham High where at risk students are referred to Valor by school counselors. Additionally, when students are registered, the Parent Information Center explains about the alternative school. The discussion shifted to the accepted enrollment, the lack of expansion this year, and a waitlist. The superintendent explained that fifty students were initially enrolled during Valor's first year. While the plan had been to increase enrollment over the next few years, a change in leadership led her to halt the expansion of the school for this year. She explained that an increase in enrollment to seventy-five or one hundred students, would likely spark accountability percentages from DESE. A low accountability percentage will lead to intervention from DESE and might cause changes to the curriculum, program style, etc...

The Mayor expressed concern that students may not realize Valor is an option if it is only a referral based program.

Dr. Mendonsa explained Valor was designed for students seventeen years and older who are under-credited and need support or who are expectant mothers and need a slightly alternative model for education. A student is typically referred from Waltham High and multiple conversations are had prior to enrollment, emphasizing commitment. While Valor's expansion as a school would trigger DESE involvement, a surge in enrollment would also signify an issue at Waltham High.

Ms. DeJoannis asked if any Valor students have thrived and opted to return to Waltham High. The superintendent indicated there have not been any but that it is possible. Based on a request from Ms. Wong-Bigelow, Dr. Mendonsa confirmed that an increased Valor enrollment as a school, would likely lead to DESE involvement due to accountability percentages. A Valor enrollment increase with a program-based model would not trigger DESE involvement but the dropout rate would factor into Waltham High's. Ms. Wong-Bigelow confirmed there should be more communication and discussions with Valor staff about this.

VOTED: On motion by Mayor McCarthy, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to receive information about 1. What is the written process for Waltham students to enroll in Valor High School at the beginning of the school year? / 2. What is the written process for Waltham students to enroll in Valor High School during the school year? / 3. At what point does the Waltham School Department determine a vacancy at Valor High School either at the beginning of the school year or during the school year and what is the written process for filling a vacancy? All in favor.

Ms. Wong-Bigelow left the meeting at 8:27pm.

Mr. Zanghi indicated it would be interesting to see how other districts with similar schools or alternative programs handle accountability percentages, dropout rates and whether DESE provides guidance.

Ms. Wong-Bigelow returned at 8:29pm.

Dr. Mendonsa requested any Valor related questions be emailed in advance so they can all be addressed at the meeting.

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to hear from off-committee members. All in favor.

Mayor McCarthy left the meeting at 8:32pm.

FISCAL MATTERS

a) FY '27 Preliminary Budget Presentation

The superintendent reviewed the district's priorities when preparing the budget, the amount spent on classroom supplies for students at each school and the proposed operational increases across the district for the upcoming year.

Mr. Mazza advised that the district will see savings due to a consolidation of and change in Special Education software. Additionally, funds originally earmarked for

use by the directors, were transferred to senior class expenses. The Office of Curriculum and Instruction will support curriculum related purchases for the directors.

The superintendent shared the amount the district receives in grant funds, the Title I reductions for next year (due to an increase in community income) and the increase in personnel salaries for next year.

Mayor McCarthy returned at 8:36pm.

A review of the student / teacher ratio for neighboring and similar districts showed that Waltham averages 10.2 students to every one teacher. Proposed additional positions at the elementary, secondary and district level were detailed for an increase of 21.5 FTE.

Mrs. Coleman left the meeting at 8:45pm and returned at 8:49pm.

Dr. Mendonsa then shared the proposed reduction of 23.15 FTE across the district, to be experienced mostly at the elementary level. She explained many of the reductions will be offset by natural attrition - the retirement of current staff or resignations by staff taking positions elsewhere. Dr. Mendonsa outlined the plan to restructure Central Office, offered a new organizational chart, and noted the financial impact on the budget.

Assistant Superintendent Mazza reviewed the Special Education out of district costs and how Circuit Breaker funds will help offset costs. School spending, enrollment, Chapter 70 aid, and other miscellaneous increases were also explained. Mr. Mazza stated the School Department is requesting a 10.91% budget increase for FY '27. The Public Hearing for the FY '27 Budget will be held next Wednesday and then the budget will be presented to the School Committee on May 6th for a vote.

Mr. Tarallo expressed his concern with consolidating class sizes and the impact on students, especially in first and fifth grades at Stanley and kindergarten at Northeast. He indicated the amounts are close to or just over the School Committee approved levels for elementary school. Dr. Mendonsa explained that some class sizes will be impacted by students who do not return in the fall. Ms. DeJoannis inquired about adding paras to these classes and the superintendent advised that the School Committee would need to determine a certain class size that would prompt the addition of a para across the district.

Mrs. AlJammal, Ms. Wong-Bigelow, Mr. Zanghi, and Ms. DeJoannis all asked for clarification on figures contained in the budget book and both Mr. Mazza and Dr. Mendonsa answered these. Ms. DeJoannis raised the capital improvement plan, using the auditorium lighting at both middle schools as an example, and inquired about the process / timeframe for addressing items on the list. Mr. Mazza explained items on the district's capital improvement plan are tiered based on student safety, school operations, etc... and advised he will review the list with Facilities Director Jelloe.

Additionally, Ms. DeJoannis asked about providing additional support in areas where student performance appears to be lacking, starting from the elementary level up through the high school and including the transitional years between schools.

Dr. Mendonsa left the meeting at 9:44pm and returned at 9:46pm.

Ms. DeJoannis asked about the age of student chromebooks and the device refresh plan for the district. Mr. Mazza confirmed he will obtain this information from Mr. Davidson.

b) Bills on
Warrant

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to pay the bills on warrant. All in favor.

**AGENDA ITEMS
FOR FUTURE
MEETINGS**

Ms. DeJoannis inquired about the scheduling of the CTE workshop that was previously requested. Dr. Mendonsa advised she is aiming to hold the workshop during one of the upcoming summer meetings as there will be more time to review and discuss the department.

Two additions were requested to the budget book: CTE enrollment and descriptions of the Special Education programs across the district.

ADJOURNMENT

VOTED: On motion of Ms. DeJoannis, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to adjourn the Regular Meeting at 9:54pm. All in favor.

Dr. Marisa Mendonsa
Clerk