

WALTHAM SCHOOL COMMITTEE
Waltham, Massachusetts
REGULAR MEETING

MINUTES

MARCH 18, 2026

The regular meeting of the Waltham School Committee convened at 6:09pm. Present were Ms. Wong-Bigelow, Ms. DeJoannis, Mrs. AlJammal, Mrs. Coleman, Mr. Tarallo, and Mr. Zanghi. Mayor McCarthy was not present. Mrs. Coleman presided.

RECESS

VOTED: On motion of Ms. DeJoannis, seconded by Mrs. AlJammal, to move to Executive Session at 6:10pm 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, and to conduct strategy sessions with respect to collective bargaining with the Waltham School Building Trades, 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 7:06pm. 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 that due to technical difficulties, the meeting would be recorded by WCAC but not televised live. There was no one else present who indicated they were recording the meeting.

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to move item 5a out of order. All in favor.

COMMUNICATIONS

- a) Recognition of
Waltham High
School
Athletes

Dr. Mendonsa shared that five WHS athletes reached 100 point milestones during the winter season. She recognized seniors James Agostino and Michael Ayanyan for earning 100 career wrestling victories. In the rink, seniors Ava Anderson and Sophia LaFauci, along with freshman Molly Whittier, each reached the 100 point mark during the ice hockey season. The Committee congratulated the athletes and presented each with a certificate.

PUBLIC INPUT

Waltham parent Joshua Nicholas addressed the Committee to indicate there appeared to be a communication disconnect between the administration and Fine and Performing Arts Dept. relative to the proposed changes to the Show Choir offerings. He switched topics to the recent graduation rate / dropout data and asked if the state considers the impact English learners have on a district.

**STUDENT COUNCIL
STUDENT INPUT**

Waltham High School student Eva Ghazarian informed the members that the seniors had two very successful Senior Revue performances last week; spring sports tryouts are underway; NHS applications are available for juniors; the Student Council held St. Patrick's Day events, in addition to other activities taking place within the school.

**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 4, 2026;

Resignations:

- Megan Nadeau, Teacher, Plympton Elementary School - effective 03/01/2026

Dr. Mendonsa informed the Committee about a \$5,000. donation from Cityside Subaru to Plympton Elementary School. Ten Plympton teachers will each receive a \$500 [AdoptAClassroom.org](https://www.adoptaclassroom.org) credit to be used to purchase classroom materials for students.

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

**COMMUNICATIONS
(cont.)**

- 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 two children attend elementary school in Waltham for the upcoming school year.

VOTED: On motion of Ms. Wong-Bigelow, seconded by Ms. DeJoannis, to approve the staff's out of district request for the 2026 - 2027 school year. All in favor.

**SUPERINTENDENT'S
UPDATE**

- a) Miscellaneous Personnel

New Hires:

- Peter Subramanian, LTS - Elementary Music Teacher, FitzGerald Elementary School - effective 02/26/2026 - 04/13/2026;
- Selene Perez, Lunch/Recess Monitors, Dual Language School - effective 02/26/2026;
- Esther Rubin, Building Sub, Stanley Elementary School - effective 03/03/2026;
- Hamida Haroon, Substitute Teacher, District-Wide - effective 03/03/2026;
- Anne Marie Goguen, Substitute Teacher, District-Wide - effective 03/03/2026;
- Cheryl Lavoie, Substitute Teacher, District-Wide - effective 03/04/2026;
- Daniel Tortola, Substitute School, Nurse, District-Wide - effective 03/06/2026;
- Lucia Shpuntoff, Substitute Teacher, District-Wide - effective 03/09/2026;
- Jasmine Bell, Substitute Secretary, District-Wide - effective 03/12/2026

Transfers and Promotions:

- Reham Ebrahim, Whittemore Elementary School, Building Sub - effective 02/04/2026;
- Emma Ljungberg, MacArthur Elementary School, Kindergarten Teacher LTS, MacArthur Elementary School - effective 02/23/2026 - 04/17/2026;
- Jennifer Salazar, LTS - Grants and MKV Office, Central Office - effective 02/23/2026 - 04/17/2026;
- Elizabeth Palmer, Paraprofessional TASC, Waltham High School - effective 02/04/2026;
- Reham Ebrahim, LTS Special Ed. Paraprofessional, Northeast Elementary School - effective 03/04/2026 - 05/15/2026 (Approx.)
- Jennifer Salazar, LTS Secretary for Title I - Grants and PIC, Central Office - effective 02/25/2026 - 04/17/2026

b) Information

Dr. Mendonsa announced that tryouts for all spring sports began on Monday and families can check Arbiter Sports for schedules.

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

Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations Chad Mazza shared the timeline for the remainder of the FY '27 budget process. He confirmed a third budget workshop was held on March 11th and at the April 8th meeting, the preliminary budget presentation will be made to the members. The required Budget Hearing will take place at the April 15th meeting and then the School Committee will vote on the FY '27 budget at its May 6th meeting.

Director of Nursing Chrissy Young provided the members with an update from the Nursing department. Medication training and processes are a focus during PDRT time with nursing staff and new protocols are being implemented to ensure student safety and state compliance. All student vision, hearing, BMI and scoliosis screenings were completed prior to December break, which was a record. Also, two elementary nurses are retiring at the end of the school year and the positions have already been posted.

From the Family and Community Engagement area, Dr. Ray Porch provided an update about the 7th annual Parenting Awareness Conference which took place earlier this month. The conference had sixty-five attendees and included eleven workshops, lunch and raffle prizes. The goal is to review feedback, understand potential access barriers for caregivers and grow attendance.

Human Resources Administrator Kate Peretz shared an update on the internal pathways and recruitment efforts. The department is attempting to establish new partnerships with Merrimack College and Northeastern University for future pathways to licensure for current staff. Recruitment efforts are expanding, career fairs begin at the end of the month, and collaboration is continuing with the Equity Team.

Dr. Conley advised that the first CTE Chapter 74 lottery took place earlier that afternoon at Waltham High for the Auto Tech, Carpentry, Cosmetology, Electrical, and Health Assisting programs. The results will be posted in the house office and

guidance suite. The graphic design program is offering specialty printing and graphic design work by students.

Within the department of Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Education Technology and Library Media Sandy Malec advised the members that the district is fully integrated. Teachers collaborate with colleagues to design shared learning activities for students, enabling the achievement of content goals and information in diverse formats. At Waltham High, there is a full time digital learning teacher and librarian along with two library paras. Each middle school has a full time digital learning teacher, librarian and library para. At the elementary level, there are full time digital learning teachers and librarians at each school, and one library para that supports the seven schools.

School librarians partner with the Waltham Public library; engage authors to visit schools virtually or in-person; offer library orientations to help familiarize students with resources and services available, and promote literacy and community engagement through reading challenges. Digital learning teachers train staff on new initiatives and platforms; provide parents with digital support for Aspen and ParentSquare; offer coding instruction for students, and deliver lessons that align with K-12 DLCS standards.

The director provided insight into the average number of book checkouts at the elementary schools, the various clubs offered to students, support available for staff, and some of the literacy related events offered for students and families. At Kennedy and McDevitt, WEBF grant funds have been used to purchase home language books for each library using EL student input. Additionally, book challenges, typing club and coding opportunities are all available to middle schoolers. At Waltham High, One School One Story continues each summer and fall; there is a faculty book club and a library advisory council, and a partnership with Bentley's America Clicks program has been established. Other literacy promotions take place during the year to help engage students.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

a) Waltham Public Schools 2025 Graduation rates

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Dr. Shannon Conley explained why and how DESE calculates and reports graduation data and dropout rates for public schools across the state. The state calculates both a four year annual graduation rate and an adjusted cohort graduation rate in addition to also computing an annual high school dropout percentage and a cohort dropout percentage.

Per DESE, in 2025, Waltham High School had a graduation rate of 79.3%, which is 10% lower than the state average of 89.3%, and a dropout rate of 15.5%, which is nearly three times that of the state average of 5.8%. As Dr. Conley explained, the four year annual dropout rate factors in any student in grades nine through twelve that dropout during the course of that school year.

Waltham High's cohort graduation and cohort dropout rates factor in only the students who started in ninth grade and follow them through a four year period. Based on this computation, the adjusted cohort graduation rate in 2025 was 90.4% and the cohort dropout rate was 6.7%. A comparison of rates over the last four years showed that the cohort graduation rate has improved slightly, while the dropout rate has continued to rise.

Superintendent Mendonsa explained that a response plan is being developed and implemented. Enrollment and withdrawal processes will be reviewed and updated. Attendance letters will be revised to align with state language and dropout prevention action steps will follow the issued guidance from the commonwealth.

Waltham High will establish an Attendance / Dropout Prevention team; develop a credit recovery plan; implement more structured after school academic support; hire a graduation / attendance specialist, and clarify specific functions of current supportive staff. Both administrators indicated that more concrete withdrawal procedures need to be implemented across the district to help collect crucial data. The lack of previously obtained information may have led to the misidentification of students who withdrew and categorized them as dropouts when they could have enrolled in a different school district.

More information was given about the after school support and credit recovery option, as well as the function of the Attendance / Dropout Prevention Team. Additionally, the role of the proposed new graduation and attendance specialist position was detailed.

All Committee members shared their thoughts on the issues and multiple questions were asked about the lack of prior procedures and data tracking. The absence of clear, established processes, lack of stability at the principal level and the failure to follow students after they left WHS have all contributed to some of the problems. Dr. Conley clarified the proposed Attendance Buyback program and how it will support students in making up missing hours/credits that are needed to graduate.

Mrs. AlJammal noted that some of these issues were supposed to be addressed when Valor High opened. The assistant superintendent explained that Valor is an option for some struggling students. Mr. Zanghi inquired if the increase in the dropout rate over the last year can be attributed to the presence of ICE in the area and he suggested that more state-funding avenues be pursued for additional support. Mrs. Coleman requested the Committee receive an update before the end of the school year.

A conversation was started by Mayor McCarthy about Valor High, the lack of data available due to the school's small population and the differences between a school and a program. Dr. Conley explained that while Valor has its own data, there are not enough students for graduation and dropout rates to be determined and this is impactful. The Mayor inquired if more students can or should be referred to Valor and Dr. Mendonsa confirmed this year's enrollment was capped at fifty students. The Chair requested an analysis of the differences between a program and a school be completed so it can be reviewed with Valor in mind.

Mr. Tarallo sparked a discussion about the actual number of students who dropped out of Waltham High and if more information can be obtained as to why the students left.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- a) MSBA -
Waltham High
School Project

Mayor McCarthy confirmed a Big Three meeting took place earlier this week and the process to close out the project continues.

- d) Waltham High School's Career and Technical Education (CTE) Department Dr. Mendonsa shared that the Cosmetology salon will be having a soft opening on Friday afternoon for the community. In the upcoming months, Culinary will open its doors to the community as well and the preschool classes should be open in the fall.
- b) Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Nothing new was shared in this area.
- c) Dual Language School Model and Reutilization of 617 Lexington Street The 617 Committee met on Monday to continue working on developing a proposed plan for the former high school building. The group will share its presentation with the Executive Team in April and then will fine tune its presentation to be shared with the Committee in June.
- Mrs. AlJammal inquired about the possible change in CTE credits mentioned at a prior meeting. Dr. Mendonsa confirmed no students should be lacking credits and all pupils in Chapter 74 programs from sophomore through senior year will have enough credits to graduate as long as they pass their required classes. A member asked if students are allowed to enroll in Chapter 74 programs after sophomore year. It was explained that it is possible, if space permits, however they will likely not have enough program hours to obtain their certification in that field.
- During a short conversation with the superintendent, Mayor McCarthy advised that all students should know, prior to applying to CTE programs, the number of electives they will be able to take during each grade level.
- e) Waltham High School Schedule Dr. Mendonsa confirmed the schedule committee will meet again in April and will be building multiple four-year schedule models to analyze.
- f) Northeast Elementary School's Inclusive Playground Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations Chad Mazza reminded the members of the information shared and presentation made in December from the architect who designed a new inclusive playground area for Northeast Elementary School. He provided an overview of the next steps in the process, noting the overall construction should take two to four months, and requested School Committee approval to proceed with the project.

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to approve proceeding with the Northeast Elementary School's inclusive playground project. All in favor.

NEW BUSINESS

- a) Summer 2026 Meeting dates The Committee was asked to consider scheduling its two summer Regular Meetings and the weeks of July 6th - 9th and August 3rd - 6th were recommended. Mayor McCarthy asked the members to share their availability with Mrs. Kern.

FISCAL MATTERS

- a) Bills on
Warrant

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Ms. Wong-Bigelow, to pay the bills on warrant. All in favor.

AGENDA ITEMS
FOR FUTURE
MEETINGS

Ms. DeJoannis inquired about school site councils and the availability of information on school websites. A short discussion followed with Mayor McCarthy and Dr. Mendonsa.

ADJOURNMENT

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to adjourn the Regular Meeting at 8:58pm. All in favor.

Dr. Marisa Mendonsa
Clerk