

WALTHAM SCHOOL COMMITTEE
Waltham, Massachusetts
REGULAR MEETING

MINUTES

JANUARY 21, 2026

The regular meeting of the Waltham School Committee convened at 5:10pm. Present were Ms. Wong-Bigelow, Ms. DeJoannis, Mrs. AlJammal, Mrs. Coleman, Mr. Zanghi, and Mr. Tarallo. Mayor McCarthy was not present. Mrs. Coleman presided.

RECESS

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. AlJammal, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to move to Executive Session at 5:12pm to conduct strategy sessions with respect to collective bargaining with the WEA and / or to conduct negotiations with the WEA; 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 / or to conduct negotiations with the Waltham School Building Trades, and to conduct collective bargaining sessions to include a grievance hearing under Purpose 2 and to discuss strategy with respect to litigation under Purpose 3 if an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the litigating position of the public body and the chair so declares - Waltham School Administrators Association and Waltham School Committee, Grievance Dated November 4, 2025, WHS TASC Classroom Teacher Duties, to include Attorney Jonathan Atwater, HR Administrator Kate Peretz, and Superintendent Dr. Marisa Mendonsa, and to return to the regular meeting at 7:00 pm. All in favor.

RECONVENE

The School Committee reconvened at 7:04pm. Present were Mr. Tarallo, Mr. Zanghi, Mrs. Coleman, Mrs. AlJammal, Ms. DeJoannis, Ms. Wong-Bigelow, and Mayor McCarthy. Mayor McCarthy presided.

PUBLIC HEARING:
PROPOSED
EMOTIONAL
SUPPORT DOGS
POLICY

Mayor McCarthy announced the Public Hearing relative to the proposed Emotional Support Dogs policy open at 7:04pm and reviewed the guidelines for the speakers: all speakers must sign in, identify themselves and their WPS affiliation, speakers have one minute to address the Committee, and must stay on topic.

The first speaker was MacArthur teacher Toni Meconiates, owner of "Nala". She indicated she believes a policy is necessary but does not agree with classroom teachers being excluded as handlers. She thinks each school can develop a program that works for their school community and believes emotional support dogs provide many benefits. She acknowledged that the proposed policy requires principal and superintendent approval and confirmed principals can be the gate-keepers of their school's program. Ms. Meconiates believes that when Nala was at MacArthur, students were more focused, more accepting of others and were not distracted at all by the presence of the dog. She requested the members review data about the social and emotional benefits of having dogs in a school setting, starting with MacArthur. She offered to assist others in the district develop a program that works for their school so more students can have a similar experience.

Kate Moriarty, a MacArthur parent, expressed her support of allowing dogs in schools. While neither of her daughters have been in Ms. Meconiates class, both have benefited from having Nala in the MacArthur community. As a registered nurse and former SAC (including in Waltham), she has seen the social and emotional benefits, especially with an increase in issues that students are facing at younger ages. She confirmed Nala was very helpful to the school following a community tragedy two years ago.

MacArthur Drama teacher Alec Kealing confirmed he is CPI certified and acknowledged that the district is a big supporter of this program. He has seen the benefits in the school community when Nala was present and believes that even the number of visits to the school nurse have decreased. Since the district cannot afford to add an additional nurse or SAC, the ability for Nala to be present (for free) would be very advantageous for the whole school, especially since children are faced with many more serious issues than before. He requested the members remove the language preventing classroom teachers from being handlers.

The final speaker was Kennedy Middle School Assistant Principal Kate Sullivan. She explained her background as a SAC and how she spent years researching emotional support dogs. She believes strongly that emotional support dogs can provide many benefits to school communities. She has undergone training and has an emotional support dog of her own which, with school / district approval, she hopes to be able to bring into Kennedy to support all students.

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to close the Public Hearing at 7:23pm. All in favor.

RECONVENE

The Regular Meeting of the School Committee resumed at 7:23pm with all members still present.

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

The Chair announced the meeting was being recorded by WCAC.org. An individual from the Waltham Times confirmed they were also recording the meeting.

PUBLIC INPUT

There were no audience members who requested to address the Committee.

**STUDENT COUNCIL
STUDENT INPUT**

Waltham High School students Anabel Rutledge and John McCalla shared that Dance Theatre will be performing next week; Show Choir has a competition on January 31st; Senior Social took place last week with over 100 seniors in attendance; senior nights for winter sports are taking place over the next two weeks, and senior college decisions are starting to be made. A shout out to WHS senior James Agostino for earning his 100th wrestling win.

**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 January 7, 2026;

Retirements:

- Tina Lee-Lo, Waltham High School, 5.5-hour Cafeteria Worker - effective 12/27/2025;
- Sharon Duquette, Plympton Elementary School, School Nurse - effective 06/30/2026;
- Jennifer LaForest, Northeast Elementary School, Special Education Teacher - effective 06/30/2026;
- Seta Jaklian, Whittemore Elementary School, Grade 1 Teacher - effective 06/30/2026;
- Lauryl Dubin, Dual Language School, Art Teacher - effective 06/30/2026;
- Emily Duvall, Waltham High School, Special Education Teacher - effective 06/30/2026;
- Charles Rose, Waltham High School, Automotive Teacher - effective 06/30/2026;
- Lynda Savlen, Northeast Elementary School, School Nurse - effective 06/30/2026;
- Victor Vaitkunas, Waltham High School, CTE Teacher - effective 06/30/2026;
- Kevin Burke, District-Wide, Music Teacher - effective 06/30/2026

Resignation:

- Danielle Gemme, Kennedy Middle School, Health / PE Teacher - effective 01/23/2026

Dr. Mendonsa expressed her appreciation for multiple generous donations to Waltham Public Schools:

- Waltham High's CTE Dept. received a donation in the amount of \$3,000. from Toyota of Watertown. The donation will be used to establish two - \$1,500. scholarships to be awarded to two WHS seniors in the Auto Tech program;
- Stanley Elementary School received a donation in the amount of \$7,500. from the Audrey P. Connor Trust Charitable Foundation. The funds will be used to help purchase materials for the students and the school;
- The Waltham High School Girls Basketball Program received a \$5,910. donation from the Lady Hawks Hoopsters Boosters, Inc. The donation will help cover apparel, league fees and an end of season banquet for the players.

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to approve the minutes from the January 7, 2026 School Committee meeting. Roll Call: Mr. Zanghi - yes; Mr. Tarallo - yes; Mrs. Coleman - yes; Mrs. AlJammal - abstain; Ms. DeJoannis - yes, and Ms. Wong-Bigelow - yes.

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

COMMUNICATIONS

- a) Staff out of district request for '25 - '26 school year

The superintendent advised the Committee an inquiry from a staff member was received requesting approval for their child to transfer from an out of district school into a Waltham elementary school for the remainder of the '25 - '26 school year. There is space available within the school and the request has support from the school's principal.

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to approve the staff out of district request for the reminder of the '25 - '26 school year. All in favor.

SUPERINTENDENT'S UPDATE

- a) Miscellaneous Personnel

New Hires:

- Donald Broughton, LTS Social Studies Teacher, Kennedy Middle School - effective 01/13/2026-04/27/2026;
- Alicia Kolb, Substitute Teacher, District-Wide - effective 01/16/2026;
- Daniel Rosenfeld, Assistant Principal - LTS, Waltham High School - effective 01/14/2026 - 05/02/2026;
- Jennifer Salazar, Building Sub, Stanley Elementary School - effective 01/14/2026;
- Nicholas Tenaglia, Substitute Teacher, District-Wide - effective 1/20/2026

Transfers and Promotions:

- Brooke Lallensack, Building Substitute, Northeast Elementary School - effective 01/06/2026 - February, 2026

- b) Information

Yesterday, Plympton Elementary was honored as a DESE School of Recognition at a ceremony held at the State House and Plympton's Principal Adrienne Norris, Mayor McCarthy, Representative Stanley, School Committee Member Zanghi, and Dr. Mendonsa attended.

The superintendent wished WHS' Quiz Bowl team good luck in this Sunday's competition against Natick as part of GBH's High School Quiz Show.

Dr. Mendonsa advised the members that tomorrow is the ninetieth day of school - the halfway point of the school year.

Seven Waltham High students were recently recognized during a Scholastic Art Awards competition for their art work. Dr. Mendonsa read their names and pictures of their pieces were displayed for all to see.

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

Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations Chad Mazza informed the Committee that the Executive Team has met several times to review and discuss staffing requests for the upcoming school year. A budget workshop with the School Committee has been scheduled for January 28th to discuss requests.

Director of Food Services April Liles received a letter of recognition for her contributions to the Alliance K-12 Director Network (which is comprised of 24 school

nutrition directors from across the country). Ms. Liles was recognized as a top contributor to the network and a leader in innovation and overall excellence. Additionally, the director was a featured presenter at Ocean Spray's 2025 Winter Conference.

The McDevitt kitchen renovation project is in the early planning stages.

From the Office of Curriculum and Instruction, an overview of the district's math department was shared by Math Director Val Alfeo. At the elementary level, there are 147 classroom teachers, seven math coaches and four math interventionists that work with our students. The EngageNY curriculum is being used and both the IM and Bridges curricula were piloted. Math Recovery and ST Math are also being utilized by educators. A FitzGerald fourth grader received the Imagine Learning SGTI Award.

At the middle schools, sixteen math teachers supported by two math lab teachers and a math coach support our sixth through eighth grade students. Amplify (f/k/a Desmos) is the current curriculum. Seventh grade probability nights hosted by both middle schools have had record attendance over the last few years.

At Waltham High, twenty-five math teachers, along with a part-time math coach, educate students. Next year, additional computer science courses will be offered and students will be able to participate in the full PLTW (Project Lead The Way) Computer Science pathway. This will be the third pathway offered to students (BioMed and Engineering are already available.) An AP PreCalculus course is being offered this year for the first time.

From the Career and Technical Education (CTE) Department, Dr. Shannon Conley explained that MyCap professional development is underway. Additionally, staff will have the opportunity to attend upcoming MEFA training and WPS will review to determine how this can further assist students. The culinary program is undergoing Toast training and the process is underway to hire an early childhood coordinator this spring. Additionally, a variety of guest speakers have shared information about their fields with freshmen taking the CTE Exploratory program.

Ms. DeJoannis asked for more information about the guest speakers. Dr. Conley explained that various community members shared information about their specific fields, their paths for getting there and various opportunities within their areas with students. Mayor McCarthy asked how the students liked hearing from the guest speakers. Dr. Conley said they enjoyed learning more from people with experience in specific areas. Ms. Wong-Bigelow asked if contact info for the speakers was shared with students so they could potentially explore employment opportunities. She was informed that CTE staff has the info and can share it if requested.

The district's interim assistant superintendent for Special Education and Student Services Dr. Lisa Kingsley introduced herself to the Committee. She provided insight into her plan for the next six months. She is working hard to build trust with SPED staff, building principals and the executive team and to gain an understanding of where things are across the district and what the needs are that need to be addressed. Her second goal is to understand the systems and processes in place, along with the history behind them, and help prioritize areas that need attention. Additionally, to ensure continuity given the mid-year transition, she has been and will continue to meet with Dr. Stein weekly to learn as much as she can.

Dr. Ray Porch, the district's Chief Officer for Family and Community Engagement, shared pictures from a variety of events across the district. He remains committed to building trust and connections with all school communities and to increase engagement.

Mrs. AlJammal asked if he is working with SEPAC and Belpac. He confirmed he has meetings scheduled with the groups during the upcoming weeks and indicated he is hoping to have them involved in the upcoming Parent Awareness Conference in March. Mrs. AlJammal indicated it has been a while since either group has shared updates with the Committee and she would have liked to hear from them prior to upcoming budget meetings.

Mrs. Coleman asked Dr. Porch if he meets regularly with school principals. He confirmed he does meet monthly with them and has also been involved in the ongoing school SIP (school improvement plan) check-ins. She also inquired about family liaisons and PTO meetings. The assistant superintendent indicated he has met with family liaisons across the district and has attended PTO meetings. He is working with various groups to see how to increase engagement and offered some ideas they are considering. Mrs. Coleman explained that PTOs seem to regularly struggle with getting people involved.

Ms. Wong-Bigelow asked about Dr. Porch's prior experience and how he is incorporating it into the district. He provided insight into his experience in other districts and noted that increasing professional development across the district is one of his main focuses.

Kate Peretz from the Human Resources Department introduced Kaytie Dowcett, RTAP (Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program) Coordinator Devin Cummings (and WHS alum) and Donnelle James. Ms. Cummings provided an overview of the RTAP pilot program and announced the four mentor / mentee pairs from Northeast, Stanley, McDevitt and Kennedy. Mr. James is one of the apprentices currently enrolled at Bridgewater State and is being mentored by Ms. Ganem at Kennedy. Ms. Cummings said there are weekly check-ins with all involved.

Mrs. Coleman, Mr. Tarallo and Ms. Wong-Bigelow all expressed their excitement for the program and for what it can do for the district as it expands.

Mayor McCarthy asked if there is a relationship with area colleges: Regis, Brandeis, Framingham State, etc... Ms. Cummings confirmed that at the moment, all mentees are enrolled at Bridgewater State but they are looking at other schools for the future if the program is able to expand.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

a) Update on Elementary Math Curriculum

Waltham Public Schools Math Director Val Alfeo provided the Committee with an update on the math program that was piloted at the elementary level. She gave an overview of the recent math curriculum and the challenges that emerged in recent years. She confirmed the district is now seeking a curriculum that aligns to content standards and mathematical practices, in addition to enhancing student engagement, discovery, and overall learning experience. Ms. Alfeo detailed the process used to examine potential curricula, including developing a vision statement, scrutinizing math resources, piloting units from more than one program, vetting resources, and reviewing recommendations from principals.

Fourth grade MacArthur teacher Samantha Harris shared that the council's feedback supported the implementation of the Bridges curriculum, as did the feedback received from district principals. She read a number of specific comments from educators. She advised Dr. Mendonsa approved the piloting of the Bridges program across all elementaries.

Whittemore's Math Coach Andrea Lamb identified some key features of the Bridges curriculum: inquiry, visual models, distributed learning, equity and conceptual understanding, and procedural fluency and explained how they benefit students. Bridges units and Number Corner Months were also highlighted as being important elements of the program.

Ms. Alfeo explained next steps for the implementation of the curriculum include: informing the district of the decision, beginning professional development for building staff and admin, procuring teacher and student materials as well as classroom kits, and providing families with companion documents throughout the year to help support students.

Ms. Wong-Bigelow asked if students are learning both conceptually as well as procedurally and Ms. Harris confirmed they are. She shared examples of this and also confirmed that the program provides recommendations of various activities / games if students are struggling with various concepts.

Mrs. AlJammal asked Mrs. Alfeo if there are any scheduling issues on the elementary level that might impact the full implementation of this program. Mrs. Alfeo confirmed this is something they are keeping an eye on and she has been discussing with principals and educators.

Mr. Tarallo indicated he is impressed with the feedback and thinks this is a positive change for the district.

Dr. Mendonsa thanked Ms. Alfeo, Dr. Conley and the math team for their hard work and dedication on this lengthy project.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- a) MSBA -
Waltham High
School Project

A Big Three meeting was recently held with LeftField, Consigli and SMMA to review the close out paperwork which should be submitted to the state soon.

- b) Anti-Racism,
Diversity,
Equity and
Inclusion

The next meeting of the district's equity team will be held on Monday, February 2nd. The work continues in the small groups dedicated to professional development for educators and the student experience. The team hopes to have a plan to present to the members by the end of the school year with the goal of tying it into the district's upcoming new strategic plan.

- c) Dual
Language
School Model
and
Reutilization of
617 Lexington
Street

Dr. Porch updated the members following the most recent meeting of the 617 Committee. He indicated five small groups have been created to tackle various parts of this project. They are strategically reviewing the options for the 617 Lexington Street building.

d) Emotional
Support Dogs
Policy
(Second
Reading)

The Emotional Support Dogs Policy returned for the second reading again.

Mr. Tarallo made a motion to approve the Second Reading of the Emotional Support Dogs policy and it was seconded by Mrs. Coleman for discussion.

Mrs. Coleman explained that she has heard from many people across the district about this issue. She explained that she is a dog lover and that this matter is not about a single dog or school but rather, about the district as a whole and what is best for the students. She heard from numerous people who are not in favor of dogs in schools or with classroom teachers being handlers. She detailed some of the feedback she received relative to: students with allergies or anxiety, emergency situations in buildings, the lack of equality if not all schools will have a dog, the overwhelming sense that a dog can be a distraction, questions about liability if something unforeseen should occur, etc...

Member Coleman continued and stated that while the policy sub-committee analyzed policies from across the state, she reviewed policies across the country. She did not find any that indicated classroom teachers can be handlers and in fact, the vast majority specified that SROs, SACs or building admin would be identified as handlers.

Ms. Wong-Bigelow echoed similar sentiments and expressed that while emotional support dogs can be beneficial, they are not typically regularly in schools but rather visit occasionally or following a tragic event.

Ms. Wong-Bigelow proposed a friendly amendment to add item 1A to the first page of the policy and it was approved by Mr. Tarallo.

VOTED: On motion of Ms. Wong-Bigelow, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to amend the proposed policy to include: "1a. The superintendent may grant an exception to the standard 10-day application and approval requirement when an urgent or emergent social emotional or traumatic need of an individual student or the student body is identified. Such exceptions may permit approval within a shortened timeframe, including same-day or week-of approval, when supported by qualitative and/or quantitative information (i.e. sudden family separation, school-related traumatic events, or documented cases of severe bullying). Any expedited approval is subject to all other requirements of this policy." All in favor.

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to approve the Second Reading of the Emotional Support Dogs policy, as amended. All in favor.

e) Waltham High
School's Career
and Technical
Education
(CTE)
Department

There was nothing additional shared in this area.

NEW BUSINESS

- a) Waltham
Public Schools
Revised Meal
Charge Policy
(First Reading)

The superintendent reminded the Committee that back in the fall, a revised Meal Charge Policy was presented and approved. A copy of the approved policy was submitted to DESE as part of a recent audit packet. DESE responded and indicated that our policy cannot include the language "Graduating seniors must resolve all negative balances before graduation and the receipt of their cap and gown." despite the fact it previously had. The language was removed and is being re-presented to the Committee for approval.

VOTED: On motion of Mr. Tarallo, seconded by Mrs. Coleman, to approve the First Reading of the Waltham Public Schools Revised Meal Charge Policy. All in favor.

Mayor McCarthy asked if any clarification or guidance was provided by DESE as to an alternative to recoup outstanding expenses. A discussion between multiple members, Mr. Mazza and Dr. Mendonsa ensued about when and why students might have an outstanding balance (breakfast and lunch are free) and how balances are handled. Dr. Mendonsa confirmed she would obtain more information.

FISCAL MATTERS

- a) FY '26 Out of
District Tuition
and
Transportation
update

Mr. Mazza informed the Committee that a sharp increase in special education out of district placements for this year has led to a budget deficit. He indicated that so far this year, nineteen students have been transferred to outside schools as their needs cannot be met in the district. There are currently seven more students awaiting outside placements. In addition to paying tuition costs for the 103 students currently out of district (plus the seven pending), the district is also responsible for each student's transportation to / from their new school. He advised that the approved budget for this area was \$7,050,860 but in actuality, the district is facing a projected expenditure of \$13,758,647 (after the pending seven students are placed).

The assistant superintendent advised that with the offset of Circuit Breaker funds received quarterly from the state, the large deficit will be reduced and he explained how the funding is determined. He anticipates the district will receive \$4,903,644 back in funding from the state. That amount combined with the remaining Circuit Breaker funds from last year, will leave the district with an anticipated \$1,024,967 deficit.

Mr. Mazza confirmed the Finance Department is reviewing all financial records to determine if any additional funds can be allocated to offset this.

Mr. Tarallo asked if 110 students is normal or high for a district our size. Dr. Mendonsa explained it is a bit on the high side but IEPs need to be honored. Also, the district has seen students move to Waltham with outside placements already and the district needs to take on the costs for those residents. A big priority will be placed on reviewing our internal special education programs to determine if they are running as effectively as possible. She believes more training and support for special education paras and educators may help offset some future out of district placements. An analysis will also be done to see if our programs are actually supporting the needs of our students and whether anything should be changed to make programs more effective.

Mrs. AlJammal advised she is dismayed to hear that with so many subseparate programs that some may not be working as effectively as we thought. Dr. Mendonsa

confirmed we have many effective programs with wonderful educators but we need to evaluate the programs based on the current needs of our students to see if anything needs to change.

Mrs. AlJammal asked Mr. Mazza about contingency funds, the process for special education estimates and when the issue was discovered. A conversation between Mr. Mazza, Dr. Mendonsa, Dr. Kingsley and the Committee members ensued about the out of district placement process, contracts, signatories, and funding. The Mayor confirmed no deficit spending can take place and, as soon as a shortfall is uncovered, the School Committee and City Council need to be notified. Mayor McCarthy requested Mr. Mazza collaborate with the city's legal department to ensure the proper process is being followed in accordance with the city's charter. She also requested an update at the next meeting.

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. Wong-Bigelow asked for information to be shared at an upcoming meeting about the possibility of GPS tracking for our school buses as well as the addition of cameras on bus arms. The Mayor confirmed this was previously researched and our bus vendor was unable to have cameras installed. Mr. Tarallo suggested looking into Framingham's bus program as he believes they have GPS tracking. Dr. Mendonsa indicated she believes there is the capability if the district owns their own buses. Mayor McCarthy noted that if there are some zoning changes in the city, there might be the ability to park the buses at 617 Lexington Street.

ADJOURNMENT

VOTED: On motion of Mrs. Coleman, seconded by Mr. Tarallo, to adjourn the Regular Meeting at 9:25pm. All in favor.

Dr. Marisa Mendonsa
Clerk