

Oyster River Cooperative School Board

Regular Meeting Minutes

December 3, 2025

DRAFT

SCHOOL BOARD PRESENT: Matthew Bacon, Heather Smith, Denise Day, Sean Harrison, Renee Bennett, Giana Gelsey. **ABSENT:** Kelly Ickes

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE: Elise Bacon

ADMINISTRATORS PRESENT: Dr. Shaps, Suzanne Filippone, Amy Ransom, Catherine Plourde, David Goldsmith, Misty Lowe, Bill Sullivan, Rebecca Noe

STAFF PRESENT: Jessica Whalen, Chris Hall, Sarah Curtin

GUEST PRESENT:

I. CALLED TO ORDER at 7:00 PM by Chair Matt Bacon at Oyster River High School. Matt thanked the high school for hosting tonight and asked for a motion to enter a non-meeting session.

Denise Day made a motion to enter a Non-Meeting Session, 2nd by Sean Harrison. Motion passed 6-0 with the student representative voting in the affirmative.

Regular meeting resumed at 7:21 pm.

II. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Denise Day made a motion to approve the agenda, 2nd by Sean Harrison.

Under Discussion & Action Items, Matt Bacon moved "Candidate Forum" to the next regular board meeting and added a non-public session to the end of tonight's meeting.

Motion passed with correction 6-0 with the student representative voting in the affirmative.

III. PUBLIC COMMENTS

Tom Daly submitted the following public comment:

I would like the Board to be aware of the Town of Durham's proposed budget for 2026 of approximately \$22 million dollars. As of Monday's Town Council Meeting, this budget will create a 17-18% year on year tax increase to Durham taxpayers. Projecting over the next 3 years, Durham residents are looking at a tax increase of up to 40%. It will be a difficult tax year for Durham and we have seen Town Staff working diligently to spend within our means. We all want the Oyster River Community to be welcoming to new families. Our middle school enrollment data shows that we have unused capacity in our system. We will not use that capacity unless we can attract families to the district. Rising tax burdens will not attract families to our district. I understand the Board will be reviewing a District Budget. As you consider this Budget, please note that residents are already experiencing a heavy tax burden increase in Durham. I encourage the Board to look deeply into the budget in an effort to approve a budget with accommodations inflation but without passing additional tax burden to residents. Regarding the capital projects at Mast Way and Moharimet Schools, please ensure that we, as community members, can feel confident that the board, administration, staff at each facility have exhausted every viable path for improvement before presenting another large bond to the community. We need to know that deep diligence has been completed to justify additional bonds which will only exacerbate the 40% increases I refer to above.

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Denise Day made a motion to approve the November 17, 2025 Regular Meeting Minutes, 2nd by Sean Harrison.

Denise Day made the following correction: On page 4 under List of Policies for First Read, in the second motion, change that Denise Day voted in the negative, so it reads, "Motion passed 6-1 with Denise Day opposing and the student representative voting in the affirmative."

Giana Gelsey made the following correction: On page 1 under Bruce Fenton's public comment change "said" to "claimed" in line 6 and change "against moral conduct for a public position" to "illegal for a school board member"

in line 7 so it reads, "He also claimed the comments made by an existing school board member that compared followers of a vigil to the KKK are illegal for a school board member."

Motion passed with correction 5-0-1 with Heather Smith abstaining and the student representative voting in the affirmative.

V. ANNOUNCEMENTS, COMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS

A. District

David Goldsmith of Moharimet announced the annual Coding & Cocoa event will take place on Dec. 10th with a focus on AI. He gave a big thank you to Digital Learning Specialist Sarah Curtin for organizing the day. He also thanked volunteers from Liberty Mutual who will work with students in the classrooms and the Nutrition Department for organizing hot cocoa. On Dec. 11th the 4th Grade will hold their Chorus Concert at 6:30 pm in the Morse Recital Hall. David recognized Music teacher Beth Struthers for her hard work and dedication. Students can look forward to an assembly by the middle school band and chorus prior to break.

Misty Lowe of Mast Way announced the school celebrated their Coding & Cocoa event today. She thanked Technology Integrator Susan Leifer for her hard work coordinating an exceptional experience that introduced "Hour of AI". The STEM Mobile from UNH hosted kindergarten and volunteers from TurboCam taught robotics to 1st graders in addition to donating reusable cocoa cups. Mobius Mobility brought the Luke Arm and iBot to 2nd grade and the Shipyard hosted a fun Sphero Robotics coding event with 3rd grade. The 4th grade attended a discussion on AI with local industry leaders. Art teacher Mrs. Fitch worked with 4th graders to sculpt their own cocoa mugs in art class. Upcoming Chorus Concerts include 4th Grade on Dec. 4th at 6:30 pm and 3rd Grade on Dec. 10th at 6:30 pm. Both performances will be held at ORMS in the Morse Recital Hall. Students can look forward to holiday music performed by the middle school jazz band and chorus on Dec. 19th.

Bill Sullivan of ORMS announced this Friday, Dec. 5th from 3:30 – 6:00 pm is the third annual Dodgeball Tournament, which is a fundraiser for the Washington D.C. trip. The Grades 6-12 Orchestra Concert will take place on Dec. 9th at 6:00 pm in the Morse Recital Hall. All are welcome to attend the monthly PTO meeting on Dec. 9th at 6 pm. On Dec. 13th ORMS is hosting the largest-ever Robotics Competition with 72 teams from all over New England. Bill thanked Jade Terrill, Jason Duff, and over 60 volunteers who are running the all-day event. Doors open at 7:30 am and the first match is at 9:00 am. They are still in need of 3 judges if anyone is interested. Dec. 18th at 6:00 pm is the Grades 6-12 Band Concert and Dec. 19th at 6:00 pm is the Grades 6-12 Chorus Concert both in the Morse Recital Hall. The last Coffee & Conversation with the Principal for 2025 is on Dec. 19th at 8:30 am at the middle school.

Rebecca Noe of ORHS congratulated the following students who auditioned and were accepted for Classical All State Festival:

Geneva Ruml (top score in the state) - alto saxophone; Ethan Boysen and Joshua Tomlinson - cello; Steffi Chen - clarinet; Lydia Jeong - piccolo; Maggie O'Shea and Isaac Williams - viola; Georgia Leone and Vivian Stuart - violin; Libby Bessette, Gwen Ickes, Devin More and Maren O'Keefe - voice

Rebecca announced the success of the recent *Noises Off* drama production. She gave a special shout out to Student Director Elise Bacon and congratulated all the actors on an outstanding and hilarious performance. This Friday at 6:00 pm there is a Pilates/Cycling fundraiser sponsored by orchestra, band, and chorus. Spots are still open and 100% of the proceeds will go toward driving the music equipment to Orlando. In a NEASC update, Rebecca shared that the school is working in committees to cover five standards that are part of a self-reflection and goal setting process for accreditation. Standard 2 on Student Learning has been passed by the faculty and the remaining standards will be presented in December and January.

B. Board

Denise Day congratulated all the actors on their very funny performance of *Noises Off*. She also recognized those who helped to create the set which was amazing.

Matt Bacon said thank you for the show of the kids and show of the community.

Heather Smith attended Mast Way's AI training and participated in Coding & Cocoa, which is her favorite activity. She had a fun time with kindergartners and thanked the school for having her.

VI. DISTRICT REPORTS

A. Assistant Superintendent/Curriculum & Instruction Report(s)

Suzanne Filippone thanked the high school department heads Lisa Hallbach, Jaclyn Jensen, Paul Lewis, Nate Grove, and Trevor Garman for their hard work around the 306's. Suzanne informed families of high school seniors that the Seal of Biliteracy can be earned, and information will be made available in January. Kindergarten registration will open on Jan. 27th in the high school MPR. Families can register during dedicated day or evening times throughout the week. Training and implementation of the new K-5 literacy program is underway. Suzanne recognized Liz Birnam, Cindy Douglass, and Alison Neri for their involvement with the CKLA pilot, noting it's been a lot of work. Sabbatical applications will begin soon, and teachers can reach out to their building principal or Suzanne if they have any questions.

Sabbatical Presentation – Sarah Curtin

Suzanne Filippone and David Goldsmith were excited to introduce Digital Learning Specialist Sarah Curtin to speak about her spring sabbatical work. Sarah's initiatives have already affected the school community with a direct impact on student experiences. She has laid an essential foundation for a lot of great work to come.

Sarah Curtin thanked the district for the sabbatical. It enabled her to focus on integration to really deepen work, broaden studies, and increase collaboration across disciplines and among faculty. In a slideshow presentation, Sarah spoke about inquiry-based and project-based learning and how it leads to efficiency in teaching. It connects skills and content from multiple subject areas to maximize learning time while building connections across disciplines. Integrated learning not only increases student engagement and motivation, but it builds transferable, real-world skills. During Sarah's sabbatical she relied on professional learning communities (PLC's) at Mast Way and Moharimet to create and develop the Maple Sugaring K-4 integrated curriculum. She also connected with Dr. Joanne Reid and Dr. Susan Drake of Brock University for professional feedback. This collaboration led to developing new integrated curriculum units to try, such as the Wonder Project with Librarian and Media Specialist Chris Hall.

Chris told the Board that he collaborated with Math and Science Coach Ellen Ervin, Art Teacher Tricia Hall, and the 2nd Grade Teachers for nature journaling. The project integrated science, in-depth research, writing, and art skills. Students asked questions about nature and conducted research and interviews with community experts. They displayed their new knowledge in an artistic and interactive mural for the school.

Sarah was a recipient of the NH Agriculture in the Classroom grant and was able to purchase a reverse osmosis machine, which will greatly help the boiling process. She also attended a sugaring conference in Minneapolis that focused on K-4 integrated curriculum.

For many years, Physical Education Teacher Jessica Whalen has been working with volunteers and community members to tap trees and collect sap during PE time. Jessica said it's been a wonderful experience, and she is excited for the expansion across K-4 classrooms. Each grade level will have a focus for deeper learning, and they will cover more curriculum standards. She looks forward to new opportunities that will help students understand where our food comes from and she hopes to incorporate integrated learning with the school's pumpkin patch too.

Giana Gelsey was really excited to hear about the new sugaring curriculum and appreciated all the additions and expansions.

Denise Day saw the Wonder Project last spring. She felt it was so creative and she noted how interested the kids were in what they were doing. She thanked Sarah and everyone involved in this work.

Matt Bacon thanked Sarah for sharing her sabbatical experience with them.

B. Superintendent's Report

Dr. Shaps gave a big thank you to the maintenance and custodial staff, Dave Totty, and the bus drivers for navigating the roads during the recent storm. It took a lot of coordination, and he appreciated everyone's hard work with snow cleanup throughout the district.

Today administration and faculty completed their final session of a 7-part training around Research for Better Teaching. The feedback he received was that it provided a great opportunity to come together and hold meaningful conversations around student learning. The training provided faculty with a shared vision of quality teaching, and they look forward to application moving forward. Dr. Shaps said it goes along nicely with the Original Science Research course where students work with researchers and gain real-world application.

Communication Plan

Dr. Shaps presented a Communication slideshow to the Board and listening audience. He reviewed the initiatives that have taken place from Phase 1, which is to provide awareness and engagement of the Elementary Expansion project. A digital landing page was created to offer history, financial information, updated floor plans, and a community survey. Video raw footage of spaces is available, and communication was sent out in the form of principals' newsletters and flyers posted in the towns' libraries and fire/police departments. Phase 2 communication has focused on deepening understanding and addressing concerns. Digital updates include final scope of work, guaranteed maximum price, and all updates. Coming soon is a complete video sequence and narrative, as well as the scheduling of listening sessions, tours, and campaigns. Phase 3 will involve school tours and opportunities to listen to the community, as well as increased messaging for why expansion and renovations are necessary and the financial costs. Encouraging voting turnout and publicizing polling location and hours will follow. Dr. Shaps said his intention is to provide full transparency around projected costs and tax impacts and he encouraged the community to visit the website for regular updates.

Denise Day was glad they will be engaging the public at the music performances. She said they had an active community group to advocate for the middle school and to raise funds for signs. Denise wondered about PTO involvement for this project. Dr. Shaps appreciated the suggestion and said it is something to consider.

Renee Bennet reminded the public that the elementary projects are about legal mandates, not just space vs. enrollment numbers. The functional needs of current spaces are not delivering mandated programs effectively. Renee said conversations need to shift to be about delivering services to students, and she hopes the video narration of the spaces will show the limitations that teachers and students face daily.

C. Business Administrator – See Discussion & Action Items.

D. Student Representative Report – Elise Bacon

Elise announced the ORHS Dance Team is joining with UNH for a performance on Sat. Dec. 6th at 4 pm in the high school auditorium. The National Art Honor Society is hosting an ornament and cookie decorating event on Dec. 10th from 5-8 pm in the high school art room. It is free to all and donations are welcome. This is the first year of the National Art Honor Society and the 30 inducted members look forward to engaging the community around art. On Dec. 15th there will be a Blood Drive in the high school MPR. Elise congratulated all the students that auditioned and made it into All State.

E. Finance Committee Report – None provided.

F. Other – None provided.

VII. UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGENDA – None provided.

VIII. DISCUSSION & ACTION ITEMS

ORPaSS Negotiated Agreement

Matt Bacon recognized the importance of paraeducators and the critical support they provide as well as the nutrition staff for making sure students are fed each day. He feels it's a good contract.

Matt Bacon made a motion to approve the ORPaSS Negotiated Agreement for the paraeducators and school nutrition workers for the ensuing 3 years from 2026-2029, 2nd by Heather Smith. Motion passed 6-0 with the student representative voting in the affirmative.

Matt recognized all the people in the bargaining unit. He said they are essential to the function of school and he thanked them for coming to an agreement.

2026-27 School Calendar First Read

Regarding the district calendar, Dr. Shaps said there is give and take around other districts in how we come to a consensus. There are a lot of working pieces including CTE, strategizing TW days, and vacations. They front-load the calendar with hours so they meet early on knowing there will be snow days. The district also prefers not to extend learning into late June as it becomes difficult for students to focus. Dr. Shaps said the calendar is subject to change if state law is passed requiring schools to start after Labor Day.

Giana Gelsey hopes the law doesn't get passed forward with starting after Labor Day. She felt front-loading is more useful and it's not beneficial to go past Juneteenth. She pointed out that AP Testing has standardized dates and schools across the nation start a month earlier, so they are a month ahead of our students. She would like to bring this conversation up with surrounding schools and consider an earlier August start date.

Heather Smith asked why Sept. 8th is a day off since it is the day after Labor Day. It was confirmed that schools are taking the day off because of the state primary.

Since June 19th is a Saturday, the Board discussed whether to observe it June 21st, if there is school that day, or June 18th which is when the federal government is observing it. Dr. Shaps will double check, and the snow days will be changed to reflect observance of the holiday. Suzanne pointed out that if school starts after Labor Day, with the 5 snow days, contractually they will not meet. The Guild Contract has a specified end date for teaching.

Please note, this calendar is not official and it is still under review and discussion.

Candidate Forum Update – Moved to the next regular board meeting.

FY27 Budget/Warrant

Additions and reductions were discussed at tonight's meeting. Approximately one million dollars have been found in reductions of personnel and operations that will not compromise delivery of services. Information related to these deductions in terms of staffing, class size, and strategic planning around efficiency will be posted on the website. The district is asking the voters to consider a couple of warrants that are critical to moving forward. Warrant 1 is the elementary expansion bond at a guaranteed price of \$9,827,000 and Warrant 2 is the general operating budget of \$59,644,022 million dollars, including additions and cuts.

Matt Bacon made a motion to set Warrant 2 the Operating Budget at \$59,644,022 million for FY26-27, 2nd by Renee Bennett.

At the budget workshop board members discussed in great detail the administrator's needs at each building. Denise Day said she was unsure about the reduction of a school nurse, noting that some students have chronic health problems and benefit from a constant person addressing their needs. She understands there will be sub nurses available to fill holes, but she still felt reducing a nurse could compromise needs of certain students.

Dr. Shaps stated that adequate staffing to match needs of students will continually be a priority. Based on enrollment change and staffing ratio, he felt comfortable that the recommended nursing staff would provide quality of care. As students move through schools, they enter programming with staff assigned to meet individual needs and the level of care and their frequency is adjusted.

Sean Harrison said he had a similar concern with his child's chronic condition and felt comfort in knowing there was coverage.

Director of Student Services Catherine Plourde said they are onboarding 6 new RN subs which will provide an increased pool of coverage. She asked if staffing an additional full-time person for the event that a nurse is out makes sense. They were unable to maintain a float nurse model and noted that other districts share nursing support within the district. She said there are times when a nurse must be shared within our buildings, but by increasing the sub pool it should help with coverage and provide flexibility. Catherine noted that additional staff were hired during Covid and have been maintained, but since then there has been a shift in student care and numbers, and the level of need isn't there.

Matt Bacon felt if it can be done safely and help the taxpayers it is part of their job to be efficient without affecting student experience and health. He said it is not his intention to downplay health concerns because they are extremely valid.

Heather Smith said the default budget reflects current expenditure, which is legally required.

Business Administrator Amy Ransom noted that revenue is subject to changes since they have to look at what historically happens and what subsequently will happen. State funding will hopefully offset taxes with a return to the community. The Barrington tuition rate changed because of an increase in tuition. A reduction to the retainable could be the biggest change and she is hoping to get full special education aid. The estimated adequacy in state grant is subject to change by town based on enrollment numbers. The current breakdown looks like 4.8% for Durham, 6.9% for Lee, and 7.6% for Madbury.

Heather Smith emphasized that the apportionment is a guess since it uses year end data. It depends on the state grant and the number of students at each school, so these numbers serve only as estimates. Numbers such as English as a second language learners and free/reduced lunch also impact money from the state. The percentage tax increase overall with all warrant articles is estimated at 5.7% for the district. Heather said we won't know final numbers since apportionment is year old data of the previous year's property values.

Matt Bacon said they have to make decisions with the data in front of them and next year's budget looks good.

Renee Bennett felt they have been thoughtful and have shown balancing responsibility by making necessary cuts and by spending money on curriculum because the 306s have changed. Since Concord has made legislation changes, the school district must spend money to meet those changes. Renee said it's a solid budget and meets the values of the Oyster River community.

Suzanne agreed, adding that the legally required adoption of the K-5 ELA program is costly. It is state mandated but not state funded.

Giana Gelsey felt they were proposing a bond that meets state-wide requirements and addresses district-wide issues. She agreed they came up with a budget that maintained fiscal responsibility.

Dr. Shaps reiterated it is about making hard decisions that affect our schools and the community. The district makes a consistent effort to examine needs, make appropriate deductions and additions, and maintain a quality of services K-12.

Matt asked for any further discussion and in seeing none restated the motion.

Matt Bacon made a motion to set Warrant 2 the Operating Budget at \$59,644,022 million for FY26-27, 2nd by Renee Bennett. Motion passed 6-0 with the student representative voting in the affirmative.

Amy Ransom asked the Board how'd they like to fund the Elementary Expansion project so they can inform the community. For example, there are 10-year and 15-year options, but the longer the payment plan the more they'll pay in interest. She said a 10-year bond with level payments at a 3.44% interest rate would provide stability for planning and the least amount of interest, and Matt agreed.

Matt Bacon made a motion to approve using the 10-Year Estimated Bond Schedule for the Elementary Expansion Project, 2nd by Denise Day. Motion passed 6-0 with the student representative voting in the affirmative.

Matt Bacon stated the Finance Committee recommended moving \$125,000 to Turf and \$125,000 to Special Education. It's the same dollar amount, just going to different funds, and its money that was already collected so there is zero tax impact. Since there is uncertainty around federal grants, the district would like to safeguard the Special Education Trust Fund and set aside funds to fill the gap that may happen. Dr. Shaps felt it was important to have a funding stream to maintain responsibility in the absence of grant money.

Matt Bacon made a motion to approve two warrant articles on the ballot to move \$125,000 into the Special Services Trust Fund and move \$125,000 into the Turf Fund, 2nd by Sean Harrison. Motion passed 6-0 with the student representative voting in the affirmative.

Heather Smith reviewed a graphic organizer that summarized budget information for the public. The Board provided feedback for content, layout, and graphics with suggestions for a QR code to link to more information.

IX. SCHOOL BOARD COMMITTEE UPDATES –

The Manifest was reviewed and accepted for the following manifests.

Vendor Manifest #11: \$194,885.81

Payroll Manifest #12: \$834,311.13

X. PUBLIC COMMENTS – None provided.

XI. CLOSING ACTIONS

A. Future Meeting Dates: December 17, 2025 – Regular School Board Meeting – ORMS Morse Recital Hall
January 7, 2026 – Joint Board Meeting with Barrington – TBD
January 14, 2026 – Bond & Budget/Regular Board Meeting – ORMS Morse Recital
January 21, 2026 – Regular School Board Meeting – ORMS Morse Recital Hall

XII. NON-PUBLIC SESSION: RSA 91-A:3 II {If Needed}

NON-MEETING SESSION: RSA 91-A2 I [Moved to beginning of meeting]

Matt Bacon made a motion to enter Non-Public Session RSA 91-A:3II (F) at 9:38 pm, 2nd by Sean Harrison.

- **Consideration of matters relating to the preparation and carrying out of emergency functions.**

Motion passed by roll call vote.

Matt Bacon made a motion to return to public session at 9:50 pm, 2nd by Sean Harrison. Motion passed by roll call vote.

XIII. ADJOURNMENT

Heather Smith made a motion to adjourn the regular board meeting at 9:52 pm, 2nd by Renee Bennett. Motion passed 6-0.

The School Board reserves the right to take action on any item on the agenda.

Respectfully Submitted,

Karyn Laird, Records Keeper