

# Keene School District

## Keene Board of Education Retreat Minutes

Date: August 11, 2026

Called to Order: 5:30pm

Time Adjourned: 8:56pm

Location: Jonathan Daniels PD Center, 227 Maple Ave Keene, NH 03431

### In Attendance

Russell Denney, Board Member

George Downing, Chair

Randy Filiault, Board Member

Jennifer Friedman, Board Secretary

Dylan Germana, Board Member

Heather Gilligan, Board Member

Kris E. Roberts, Parliamentarian

Paige Walker, Vice Chair

Jason Washer, Board Member

Robert Malay, Superintendent

Benjamin White, Assistant Superintendent

Sharyn D'Eon, Assistant Superintendent

Gianna Geraghty, Student Representative

Anne Elser, Director of Student Services

### Called to Order

Chair Downing called the retreat to order at 5:30pm

### Opening & Retreat Objectives

The budget cap question, by legislation, will be on the November ballot, and this is something that will need clear communication for the public so they understand what this vote passing would mean for the District, budgeting, and taxes.

The goal was to have a similar base to work from on each topic at this retreat, while avoiding having specific operational directives to the administration at this time.

### Declining Enrollment

Declining enrollment was a trend seen across districts in New Hampshire, and it was time to begin looking at how to allocate resources to adjust for lower enrollment. The materials reviewed included an executive summary, desired outcomes, and a checklist to review.

Mr. Malay suggested posing the question as "What problem are you trying to solve?" and use this to guide discussions. Mr. Friedman said it needed to be seen how the District can contract responsibly and what that contraction would possibly look like. Information and data would be needed so the board would know when it needed to take action on declining enrollment.

In the past, discussion around declining enrollment only touched upon the most extreme options, such as redistricting or closing a school. Instead, the threshold needs to be determined and options for how to react and constrict through the declines. Mr. Roberts spoke about the past, when enrollment declined enough for Jonathan Daniels to be closed as a grade school. At that time, around 2009-2010, decisions

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were held on how to be proactive and control the change of enrollment coming, without the change becoming so drastic.

The plan then was to begin to phase out students in Jonathan Daniels, and then as students moved though and graduated, to reconsider redistricting. Variances were also reigned in to keep within budgets. The administration also took more control of the budget process to have principals justify budget proposals. Now, the board needs to work together to control what is to come in a few years down the line. This would be determining the thresholds.

At a certain threshold, four grade schools would not be sustainable. However, there are steps that will be reached before this event. Time has shown closing Jonathan Daniels was a justified decision. Mr. Downing spoke about changes being controversial, even smaller ones such as closing a classroom within a school.

There are movements made to buy time, such as staff reallocation, or the sharing of services. Reallocation is not just of staff, but also of resources, including physical space. This is a way to find savings.

By law, the District was able to provide the services of charter schools in the home school. Right now, a charter school can be reimbursed to provide services, other times services are contracted out, which becomes more expensive. Dr. White said it has yet to be explored to bring the charter students into the home building to receive required services. This was not done as a practice.

The current model for clusters requires two teachers for the core subjects, and this cannot change unless the cluster system was changed, Mr. Downing explained. There were pros and cons to this, but reduced population may soon lead to a needed change of the model. One cluster would not be realistically needed until about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the population was down.

Ms. Friedman brainstormed other possible solutions, such as having one of the middle school buildings become a junior high that is separate from the high school building. She said thinking about more creative ways and different ideas to consider at this point would be good for the discussion. Mr. Downing personally did not think it was academically good to split the grades by building, such as K-2, and had done research on the topic. He suggested if this ever was a suggestion that came down from the administration, it would need to be backed up by research that it would be beneficial for students and their education.

Mr. Malay spoke about how enrollments are estimated each year. This was mainly done by reviewing one grade level moving up to the next. The most difficult to predict was incoming kindergarten. This was done by studying birth rates, while taking into account not all will be attending public school. Birthrates were predicted for five years of data, but this estimate was not scientific or a guarantee.

Dr. White spoke about reviewing trends coming up for the next five years, and there is a formula used to help get a projection for incoming kindergarten. What is harder, is predicting any move-outs and students going to private schools. The current trends in population were more transient than in the past. The Northeast and NH in general, has seen population decline which is accelerating.

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The board discussed what charge to give the administration on this topic. Ms. Walker suggested seeing threshold numbers on when movement needs to be made, and a review of staffing, programming, and facility options. Asking for a threshold would define what a critical threshold would be for enrollment. The definition should be broad enough to allow for different possibilities for action. Options can also be presented for short and long term solutions for the use of District and SAU resources to address the constraints raised by declining enrollment. The administration can identify a timeline or threshold number where solutions would be recommended to be utilized.

The board suggested the superintendent return with a plan on how to approach this request to make a threshold and options, not the actual plan itself at this time. The first charge will be how to address this topic. The Finance Committee will receive updates on this by the end of the 2026-2027 school year.

*(about 56 min in)*

***Ms. Walker moved that the Keene Board of Education direct the administration develop a plan to research and identify short and long term solutions for the use of District and SAU resources to address the constraints raised by continued declining enrollment, identify timelines and thresholds for implementing those strategies, and report resulting research to the Finance Committee by the end of the 2026-2207 school year. Mr. Germana seconded Motion passed 9-0.***

## Out-of-District Placement

This had been an issue for years in the District. This is when a student with needs that cannot be provided inside the school district needs to go somewhere out-of-district to receive those services. Sometimes, the District determines it cannot provide the necessary services to the student, other times placements are court-ordered. The cost for out-of-district (OOD) placements have risen each year. It also costs more money in transportation for the placement than it used to. Even if numbers for placements were constant, the costs would still rise each year due to the rising cost of the placements and transportation. Smaller school districts can be heavily impacted by OOD placements, as it can skyrocket budgets.

The problem to be solved is the continual increase in OOD costs. What factors are in the District's control? And what proposals can be made to help address some of the issues?

Mr. Roberts said a major impact on this was dependent on the Director of Student services. There was no stability in that position and this was one reason OOD placements were not predictable or stable. There was a need to have a standard.

A plan to address the rising cost of OOD placements, while determining if there is something to do with placement that will serve the students better was requested.

One idea that the District has been discussing was bringing some OOD services in house. How can resources be allocated to best provide services? How to address the use of contracted services? This will be an allocation or resource discussions, and to have an honest assessment that the District does not have the resources to offer.

Ms. Gilligan said as a board, one question to ask was why collaboratives cannot be expanded, for example. She shared in her role as a liaison this was a question often asked. It would help the board to

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have answers to these questions, especially if the board will make decisions around OOD placements. The board had a responsibility to understand this issue more deeply.

Ms. Walker asked for feedback to define if there are disability services as identified under IDEA that the District cannot provide in order to better understand District capability. Dr. White said the discussion on collabs can be explored more deeply in the Education Committee. There are also manuals from the collaboratives that can be shared with the committee and the board.

Through the Education Committee, information can be shared to learn what the special education and collaborative staff are doing with special education students on a day to day basis. Anne Elser, Director of Student Services, said it was a long decision to arrive at a placement for a student. She said this was a team discussion and a team decision and the reason for a placement were multifaceted and one big reason was when there was a lack of progress made by the student over the course of a year.

Ms. Friedman spoke about the potential of sharing resources with the surrounding town schools and to look deeper into these possibilities and if it was possible to grow the programs. Cost benefit analysis was another interest of the board.

The request was to review all available resources and offered services and deficiencies that require OOD placements, and propose solutions to revise and/or expand resources and services to improve student outcomes and potentially reduce OOD placements.

The outcome of this will not be completed in time for this year's budget. There should be concepts that potentially can be moved forward that will support students in the collaborative programs and how to bring students back in house from OOD placements. Mr. Malay said options can be offered quickly, but plans ready to be in a budget would not be quick. There were also space considerations in the buildings.

For an overview of what the District currently has, and what is offered in OOD, this can be presented by December. Space needs would need to be reviewed, and equipment, and this would more likely be next year, possibly in May. This can be reported out to the Education Committee.

***Ms. Walker moved that the Keene Board of Education direct the administration to review all available resources and offered services and deficiencies that require OOD placements, report data to the Education Committee in December 2026, proposal solutions to revise and/or expand resources or services to improve student outcomes and potentially reduce OOD placements. Ms. Friedman seconded.***

Mr. Downing said it was with the understanding that these are not the finished product, these are just proposals and obstacles can be shared when the information is reported out.

***Motion passed 9-0.***

## **CBE (Competency Based Education)**

It was recognized that the implementation of CBE did not work. Ultimately, this has been a failed implementation in terms of the impacts of such a significant change and the impacts to the classroom and teachers, including the calibrating of scores, the front facing side to parents, and other aspects. Dr. White's plan (having taken over the CBE responsibilities as Assistant Superintendent) will take this back

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to the beginning and redo the implementation. There will be a new committee with a different approach to the last one, and research will go beyond Keene and local districts.

The committee will drive the relaunch and have stakeholders more engaged. After a year of looking at where the District is at, more microdecisions can be made and planned for, such as reporting out on a 100 point scale versus a 1-4 scale, for example.

It will take about a year to redo the implementation properly, and at that point, any other issues can be fixed at the time of implementation. The concept of competencies was not being questioned or debated, how to capture this and ensure assessments are related to the competency is where work will be done. How do we ensure we are educating students on those competencies and having them demonstrate those competencies will be reviewed. Other districts will be studied that had successes and similar failures. At the same time, how to deliver instruction, and shared practices, will be reviewed to have a better depth of knowledge.

This was bigger than CBE, if an incoming teacher wanted to know pacing guides for curriculum, it was nearly impossible. There is a curricular mess right now and the content area curriculum needs to be strengthened and connected to competencies more cohesively.

Timing was important on this as students will graduate and go on to the next grade, but many parents did not understand how their individual child was actually performing in school. Ms. Walker when considering looking at other grading practices with CBE, there may be grade-level segments that may benefit from things being done differently.

CBE implementation did not have a lot of stakeholder input used to drive the decisions. Dr. White did not want to box the District into a decision and instead make meaningful progress. There can be regular updates to the Education Committee. The CBE group is made up of many teachers, and each time they meet, this takes away classroom time, which was a consideration. He wanted to soften the deadline piece on this so there is not an over-commitment.

The intention was to keep the current grading system for the coming year across all grade levels. Any changes made this year would be stressful for teachers and students. Ms. Friedman asked if the 100 point grade scale could be used for just this one year. Mr. Downing did not see a difference in outcome with the scale or not. It was more about if a student and parent gets enough information to know where and how to improve.

At the middle school level, there is a challenge parents are facing, Mr. Downing said, parents are having a hard time interpreting what they are seeing in grading and how to best support their child. He questioned if there was a viable way to assist with this while also keeping an eye on the broader picture.

Ms. Walker said right now at the middle school, there was no consistency on how graders are converted or reported out per class. Dr. White said there will need to be more research and feedback from the middle school as there may be issues not even being considered. The approach was to review the entire process overall, and make a shift that will be permanent and long lasting instead of plugging holes in small problems.

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Mr. Downing said there was a problem right now in the middle school and the board would like to see these issues be addressed now instead of waiting for another year. Dr. White said he wanted to look at CBE overall, and in the process see what was going on right now at the middle school.

Ms. Gilligan said there could be some issues that are addressed through increased communication, such as having middle school report cards including more descriptions and better explanations. There can be keys included in the report card that would lead to immediate improvements. Dr. White agreed communication can be worked out and fixed more immediately.

The board asked if in the short term, something can be identified to improve middle school competency scores for parents. Mr. Washer questioned why the grading cannot revert to the 100 point scale. Mr. Downing explained that CBE was required for high school. Dr. White said the CBE was required for education, but he was also going to review all aspects of this as he only recently took on the CBE responsibility. There are bigger seismic changes that will be done through understanding what has been done, what is working, and what is not working.

Mr. Downing said the way scoring is done was an operational responsibility, and this was something that was not decided by the board, it was brought forward from the administration. Operational decisions are given to the administration by the RSA. Some boards go beyond their role, this can lead to breakdowns in the board role and the administration role and can fracture the district relationships.

Mr. Washer inquired about the grading system and when the board may be able to discuss this and options for how grades are done. Mr. Roberts recommended this be added to a future agenda item at the Education Committee so everyone can be prepared with proper questions and data.

The Education Committee will hold discussion on this topic in more detail and hear updates from the CBE work.

***Ms. Friedman moved that the Keene Board of Education direct the administration to identify short term communication solutions to enhance student, parent, and educator understanding of student progress, particularly at the middle school level, and report monthly to the Education Committee on the review of the current CBE implementation review successes, challenges, and ongoing plans to address the challenges. Ms. Friedman moved. Mr. Germana seconded. Motion passed 9-0***

## Communication

NHSBA put out a cheat sheet on the Right to Know law, which will be shared with board members. Outward facing communications were summarized in supporting documents.

RSA 91-A was reviewed, and the laws around meeting minutes. The current minutes go above and beyond what was legally required for minutes. Legal requirements require a heading of the topics discussed, and a record of motions. The discussion summaries are not required by state laws. Beyond that, the posting of minutes needs to be publicly available in five business days from the meeting. These draft minutes do not often get posted on the website, but are available in draft form if someone from the public reaches out to the central office. This was done because it was a draft that had to be approved by the board at the next meeting. In most cases, that is why minutes are not posted online until they are officially approved. The draft minutes are usually available sooner than 5 business days.

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There are still occasionally meetings that are not being live streamed, but with a new Director of IT, these issues were being worked out. Post-COVID, it is not legally required to stream meetings, but it is something the board would like to continue to offer, especially for full board meetings.

The provision to announce meetings was reviewed, including having notice, and having a minute taker. In practice, this means board members can socialize if they run into each other in public, but cannot discuss school board voting or business. This is especially important for committee members as three members of a committee is a quorum and discussing any board business would be considered a meeting. This also applies to emails, if group emails have substantial discussion, and multiple board members weigh in, this would be considered a meeting. The same applies if board topics are discussed online in groups. This would then apply to Right To Know law requests and being in non-compliance.

Mr. Washer asked for the draft minutes to be put on the website at the five day mark so people do not have to make the extra step of contacting the Central Office. He thought this was important to keep people up to date on what was decided at the previous meeting before the next one. Mr. Malay said people can still contact the Central Office, the reason it was not posted before they were official is that it will create extra work for the staff. Mr. Downing cautioned this can lead to issues where the draft and official minutes are in the same location and add confusion to which is official. Ms. Walker suggested advertising better that community members can call the Central Office to review the draft minutes.

Mr. Downing said the full board has a better opening of the meeting to review the rules and reminders, such as speaking into the microphone, who is attending remotely if any, etc, and an announcement can be added to direct people where to find the minutes. He said the agendas for meetings should more aggressively be published. This would be on the committee and board chair to get agendas out in a timely manner.

Mr. Washer respected the challenge that it takes more work for the staff to post draft minutes, and said the board gets access to them, but added it will also be important to show the community they are available. Mr. Downing directed this issue to the Policy Committee.

Ms. Walker said all this information may be a bigger problem, such as how to better navigate the board website.

Mr. Downing explained the board manual allows an establishment of a Communication Committee, and asked this to be formed with Shayna Pelkey and Dr. Ben White sitting in on it. The committee will have a handful of meetings to discuss how to make the webpage more usable, and also discuss how to put together a newsletter from the board, and discuss the minutes.

The board can discuss what the charge can be for this subcommittee.

The board brainstormed what should be on the website. The board page needs to be easier to find agenda, minutes and live streaming.

The committee will have to determine how frequently the newsletter is published and who writes it.

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Messaging around budget time was discussed. In the past, inserts were included in the Monadnock Shopper News, including a handout around budget time. The board should explore what it would take to use the Shopper News at least for a budget handout.

The rest of the ideas will be handed off to the Communication Committee to determine what is viable and what is not. The committee agenda also needed to improve. Teachers do get agendas emailed to them.

Chair Downing asked the board members to consider if they wanted to be on the Communication Committee and it will be established at the September meeting.

*Meeting adjourned at 8:56pm*

Respectfully Submitted,  
Jennifer Samperisi, Stenographer