

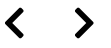
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EDITOR'S PICK

## Teachers approach City Hall amidst difficult contract negotiations

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1 of 3



Members of the Methuen Education Association filled the seats at a City Council meeting on Monday. Union members were there to advocate for better wage. Courtesy of the Methuen Education Association



**METHUEN** — Frustrated by stalled contract negotiations with the school district, the teachers' union Monday night brought their grievances about low pay and insufficient staffing to the City Council.

Rather than hearing from a sympathetic audience, however, Methuen Education Association representatives heard some push-back from councilors, who said the council was not the place to negotiate a new contract and that any funding shortfalls are the fault of school leadership, not the city.

Others added that the original source of funding shortfalls in the school district resulted from a \$4 million error in 2017 that sent the city into a fiscal crisis.

Acting Mayor D.J. Beauregard disagreed that the schools were not being invested in, while also pointing to declines in enrollment. In the 2019-2020 school year the number of students was 6,851, according to state statistics. In the 2020-2021 school year there were 6,450 students, a drop of 401 students. Last school year there were 6,532 students in the district, a slight increase of just 82 students and still well below the number of students five years ago.

Council President Joel Faretra said he was wary of giving the district additional money because he said he wasn't sure the current funds were being utilized properly. The city is conducting an audit of the school district and Faretra said he would work to implement the advice of the audit, including potentially more funding, if that's what the audit revealed.

While Faretra agreed some teachers, particularly paraprofessionals, he said that should be addressed by the school district and the School Committee, not the City Council.

He laid the blame for the impasse at the feet of school administrators.

“That’s leadership not doing their job,” he said.

The Methuen Education Association and the negotiating team from the school district have been negotiating new agreements for months. At this point, teachers’ and program assistants’ contracts are still unresolved. The city and schools have settled multiple other contracts over the last few months, including two for police, as many of the city’s contracts expired on July 1.

Educators said their situation is different, as they have been forced to grapple with dozens of vacancies, low pay compared to nearby districts and other challenges. Co-president of the union Kara Blatt said the low pay had resulted in a “staffing crisis,” as the district had 80 vacancies before the start of the 2024-2025 school year.

Meanwhile, in order to balance this year’s budget, the district eliminated 41 positions, mostly by attrition.

The now-expired contract for program assistants, who support learning for special education students, calls for assistants to be paid for six hours a day with base annual pay of \$20,808 to \$24,970. In the first year of the contract for program assistants, starting in July 2021, base pay for program assistants had ranged from \$20,000 to \$24,000.

The now expired teachers contract most recently offered a base annual salary of between \$48,656 and \$99,334 for staff depending on years of experience and education. According to the district, during recent negotiations the school and union’s offerings for teachers have differed by more than \$4 million in funding for one year of the contract.

Ironically, the school department budget has risen dramatically.

From the 2022 fiscal year, which began in July 2021, until now the total school budget has jumped from \$101.6 million to almost \$125 million. Union members also highlighted recent surges in Chapter 70 funding the school district has received, increases in free cash and other reserve funds.

But union members said higher budgets have not had corresponding impacts on pay because the city is shirking in its duties to fully fund education.

The amount of education aid the district receives has increased from \$47.6 million in the 2020 fiscal year to \$68.6 million in the current fiscal year; meanwhile the city’s own spending on the district has increased by about \$7 million over the same time frame, according to school data.

As education funding pours into the school district, the city’s percentage share of revenue going toward the schools has actually shrunk.

Educators pointed to a decrease in city spending in the district, noting that in the 2020 fiscal year the city pitched in just over 50% of the school budget, while in the 2025 fiscal year the city is paying for 45% of the district’s budget.

School Committee member Dan Shibililia said the state doesn’t fund education adequately and the city is not making up the difference.

Shibililia said the current situation was “unfortunate” and came from a history of funding not keeping up with the pace of the world. He said there had been a lack of attention to what is required to keep a school district running and that city councils have historically “not understood” the issues facing the district.

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