

METHUEN SCHOOLS

Officials accused of using students as 'pawns'

By Teddy Tauscher

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METHUEN — Ongoing tension between some members of the city council and the School Committee came to light Monday night, as committee members sought to fight back against what they called misinformation from the City Council.

During recent council meetings, some councilors said committee members were attempting to shift the blame for potential staffing cuts to the council, whose members have not seen the school budget or have the authority to interfere in the process, but will approve the overall number.

Councilor Nicholas DiZoglio accused the district of putting arts education in the cross-hairs for cuts, knowing how passionately the students would come out to defend their teachers and programs.

"I think that allowing this statement, not just purely statements but factually inaccurate and damaging statements to linger out there is bad," School Committee member Daniel Shibilia fired back at a meeting

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Monday night. "I am not going to sit by and let them bad mouth the schools."

School principals told the committee Monday they had not instructed teachers, who had been made aware their positions may be cut, to inform their students, nor had there been any collaboration on a widely circulated petition.

Superintendent Brandi Kwong had previously explained that the district tries to be as transparent with staff as possible, including by letting employees know when their job will appear on a chart during a public meeting.

Committee member Kristen Maxwell called the questioning of the principals on the matter "ridiculous" and said it was not something that needed to be discussed publicly.

"I don't think any of these principals would subject their students to that, so to ask them that publicly is just, that's ridiculous," she said.

Shibilia disagreed and also mentioned other criticism from councilors that he said indicated "a lack of knowledge and understanding."

He said he asked Mayor D.J. Beauregard if city councilors could get more training so they would know the boundaries of their authority.

The accusations against the school were levied during a City Council meeting Tuesday, April 22, and centered on a public hearing, held by the school, where dozens of students, staff and parents spoke about the possible cuts.

"I think there was a lot of misinformation that was sent out to residents and parents through some of the School Committee members," said DiZoglio. "I was not happy to receive some calls and I don't think I am the only one that had received some calls during the three-hour public participation last week."

He said the theater and arts program at the school had been used as a "pawn."

"For us to use that passion is an insult to the community," he said.

He added he was impressed with the students that had come out to support their school.

During this week's meeting, high school Principal

Anthony Curet told the committee the arts department had been floated for cuts due to a lack of interest in classes.

He added theater group Stage Door 22 would not be cut.

Councilor Francisco Surillo previously said he would not allow the arts to be cut and castigated the committee for blaming the council for a budget they have not seen yet. Beauregard, who also serves as chair of the School Committee, also vowed he would not allow the fine arts to be cut.

"If (the school budget) comes here with the cuts that they are saying and the blame that they are putting on, then one of the things I am going to look for is a call of no confidence (vote) on the superintendent and on members of that School Committee," said Surillo.

While not involved with the specifics, the council is broadly in charge of approving how much money is spent on the district every year.

As the school grapples with a proposed budget still millions over the target figure set by Beauregard, community members worried about the impacts of the district have increasingly been bringing their concerns to the council, according to councilors.

However, despite the fracas, city administrators have been looking at ways to shift one-time expenses from the school to the city, which could stave off some school cuts without increasing how much the city spends on the school year after year. Any such maneuver would need council approval.

During the nearly three-hour budget meeting Monday, members repeatedly told Kwong positions intended for cuts were crucial and she responded asking for replacement suggestions. Current proposed cuts would result in 37 layoffs, with specifics still in flux.

Committee member Mary Beth Donovan-Grassi said perhaps if the budget discussions began earlier there would be more functionality and collaboration between the two groups of elected officials.

"What we are doing now doesn't seem to be working, everyone is anxious and there is a lot of finger pointing," she said. "I do hope we can work with our colleagues on the City Council because we all have the same goal."