MINUTES OF CHESHIRE BOARD OF EDUCATION BUSINESS MEETING HELD IN TOWN COUNCIL CHAMBERS ON MARCH 19, 2026 AT 7:30 PM

Board Members Present:	Samantha Rosenberg, Chair; Anne Harrigan, Vice Chair; Tim White, Secretary; Matthew Colehour, Anne Marie Cullinan; Mark Ecke; Heather Fitzgerald
Board Members Absent:	None
Administrators Present:	Jeffrey F. Solan, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools; Marlene Silano, Assistant Superintendent of Schools; Emily Taylor, Chief Operating Officer; Kristin Lopa, Principal, Doolittle School

1. CALL TO ORDER – 7:30 P.M.

A. *Roll for Quorum*. The roll was called and a quorum determined.

B. *Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America*.
Ms. Rosenberg led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

C. *Student Representatives*. Whitney Rayball and Sylas Newell, Dodd Middle School students, reported on recent events including Hats for Hope and a hygiene product drive both run by the Dodd Student Council. They reported on a student trip to the State Capitol, tours for incoming seventh graders, helping them become familiar with the school by offering guidance, tips, and practical help such as learning to use lockers.

Connor Rayball, one of the two student representatives from Cheshire High School reported on recent events at Cheshire High School. He reported the Cheshire Boys Ice Hockey team, whose season ended in a Division II State Semifinal loss but included significant achievements such as a 21-game win streak and an SCC championship title. Individual honors were also awarded, with Ryan Miller named SCC Player of the Year and Athlete of the Year, and head coach Anthony Gusto recognized as SCC Coach of the Year. Connor said spring sports are beginning, with high student participation, 914 students, or nearly 75% of the student body, have signed up. Additionally, the Peer Health program hosted its annual unified basketball tournament, a meaningful and uplifting event for all involved. He reported on the upcoming play, Pippin.

Ms. Fitzgerald inquired about a noticeable increase in scholarship applications through the Cheshire Education Foundation. Connor explained that many students, including his peers, applied to multiple scholarships this year, largely due to improved accessibility and organization. Students were provided with a comprehensive booklet outlining available scholarships, making it easier to identify and apply for opportunities. He also credited the guidance department for being highly supportive and accessible throughout the process. Additionally, the rising cost of college has motivated more students to actively seek financial aid.

Dr. Solan and Ms. Silano added that this year they introduced a more streamlined "common application" for scholarships which allows students to enter their demographic information once and upload required documents such as resumes and transcripts, in a single place. The system, developed with support from the district's tech integration team, significantly reduced the need for repetitive data entry.

As a result, the number of scholarship applications increased substantially, rising from approximately 700–800 in previous years to over 1,100 applications this year, submitted by around 130 students. The simplified process made it easier and less stressful for students to apply to multiple scholarships.

2. PRESENTATIONS

A. School Partnership Award-Doolittle School

Mr. Colehour, the Board of Education representative to Doolittle School, introduced the school's recipient, Sarah Lefebvre. He said Sarah Lefebvre was nominated by Principal Lopa because she is a truly dedicated and valued member of the school community who has generously given her time and energy to Doolittle for many years. As an active and engaged parent, teacher, and committed PTA leader, she consistently goes above and beyond to support Doolittle students, staff, and families. Sarah has faithfully served as PTA secretary for more than five years and is instrumental to the entire PTA board. As a teacher in the building, she helps strengthen the connection between the school day and PTA initiatives, ensuring communication, collaboration, and partnership remain strong. She spearheaded the "Picture This" program, leads the VIP and Me Dance committee, runs the PTA website, and oversees the 6th-grade yearbook and promotion ceremony. In addition, she serves as a chair for the end-of-year party and is currently leading the launch of our new Bingo event. Whether attending every PTA meeting, planning and chaperoning beloved events such as the Spring Dance and Trunk or Treat, volunteering at the Ice Cream Social and book fairs, or stepping forward whenever extra help is needed, Sarah brings enthusiasm, organization, and heart to everything she does. Her unwavering commitment, generosity, and school spirit have made a lasting and meaningful impact on the Doolittle community. The Board thanked Sarah for going above and beyond for the students of Cheshire Public Schools.

3. AUDIENCE

None.

4. REPORTS OF STANDING COMMITTEES

A. CURRICULUM

I. Report on Meeting Held March 9, 2026

Ms. Cullinan reported the Committee reviewed a request for an out of country field trip to Costa Rica. In addition, the committee discussed other field trips, including Chapman, Doolittle and Norton's Natures Classroom trip. Board members asked why Highland does not participate, to which Dr. Solan noted when the enrollment at Highland was so high, it was hard to get enough chaperones. Ms. Fitzgerald asked if they revisit this each year. She wants to be sure we are giving families ample opportunity to start to participate again. Dr. Solan noted they are hoping with lower enrollment we can bring the overnight program back to Highland.

The committee received a multilingual learner update indicating the district currently serves 180 ML students representing 55 different languages, with Spanish, Mandarin, Albanian, Urdu, and Korean as the most common. Recent language proficiency testing concluded in mid-March, with results expected in mid-May, which may lead to some students exiting ML services. A detailed breakdown of ML enrollment by school level was also reviewed.

The committee heard a proposal for middle school schedule changes, with Dodd Principal Grillo exploring both six and seven-period models. Goals include increasing instructional time, adding an advisory block for social-emotional support, reducing class sizes—particularly in Spanish and improving the balance between study hall ("I block") and team time. While a six-period schedule could eliminate I blocks and combine PE and health into a wellness course, a seven-period schedule would expand time in core subjects but reduce some unified arts offerings. Final decisions depend on budget outcomes and staffing availability, particularly the ability to hire additional or dual-certified teachers.

The committee reviewed assessment data, including reading benchmark assessments and the kindergarten entrance inventory. The district uses the Acadience reading assessment in grades K–8, with K–6 assessments currently administered and scored manually, creating a significant workload for staff and requiring additional effort to report data to the state. While a digital version would streamline the process, it carries an estimated cost of $10,000–$15,000. Budget constraints, including a proposed $300,000 reduction, may impact both staffing additions and the ability to adopt this tool. Kindergarten entrance inventory data, which evaluates students across six developmental domains, shows generally stable trends over the past three years, with a slight increase in students requiring less support, potentially linked to updated school entry age requirements.

Finally, the committee discussed the district's approach to AI and digital literacy. A strategic planning group is examining AI integration through professional development, research, and resource development, with a focus on shifting perceptions of AI from a tool for cheating to a productive "thought partner." Efforts so far include staff training, dedicated professional learning time, and the use of tools within the district's existing Google platform. The district is not currently pursuing student-specific AI platforms due to cost and privacy concerns but plans to develop clear AI literacy competencies for students. Committee members emphasized both the urgency of preparing students for a rapidly evolving AI-driven workforce and the importance of teaching responsible, ethical use, while also acknowledging challenges such as staff readiness, data privacy, and the pace of technological change.

II. <u>Approval of Out-of-Country Field Trip to Costa Rica</u>

Cheshire High School teachers, Gina Corrado and Artur Branco, have requested permission to take students to Costa Rica in June 2026. Ms. Cullinan noted that the Superintendent reserves the right to cancel the trip should national security issues warrant.

MOTION by Ms. Cullinan, seconded by Dr. Harrigan.

> **MOVED**: That the Cheshire Board of Education approves the participation of Cheshire High School students in the educational field trip to Costa Rica from June 23, 2026 – June 29, 2026.

Mr. Colehour asked what would happen if a travel advisory were issued. Dr. Solan said they will continue to monitor the situation. For international trips, all families are offered and strongly encouraged to take out travel insurance.

VOTE: The Motion passed unanimously 7-0.

B. <u>FINANCE</u>

I. <u>Finance Report</u>

Dr. Harrigan reported that the approved budget 89.4% expended or encumbered to date. Ms. Taylor added that four budget accounts have exceeded 100% spending, primarily in instructional programs (tuition and outplacements) and support services (transportation). These overages are currently being offset by savings in operations and maintenance, though this may limit the amount of facilities work that can be completed by year-end and will require prioritization of projects. The administration will continue to closely monitor these areas, particularly as changes in student placements may impact both tuition and transportation costs.

Ms. Taylor provided an update on the Insurance Advisory Committee that has met three times and is reviewing medical claim trends and cost differences between Town and Board of Education plans, with the goal of identifying opportunities to reduce insurance costs.

She reported the Planning Committee is developing the FY 2027 Capital Expenditures Plan, which is being handled separately from the operating budget, with a recommendation to the full Board expected in May. The district was awarded approximately $199,000 through the District Repair and Improvement (DRIP) grant, exceeding the anticipated amount, with funds to be issued by June 30, 2026.

Facilities updates included the ongoing bidding process for the district's cleaning contract. Strong vendor interest was noted, and costs are expected to rise above the current $859,000 contract to just over $1 million due to increased square footage and building features. Energy and fuel costs were also discussed: electricity rates are locked through October 2026, and diesel and heating oil are locked through the end of the school year, while natural gas remains subject to market volatility. The administration is continuing to monitor these conditions closely.

Mr. White inquired about gas costs considering the war in Iran. Ms. Taylor explained the district currently has most of its major energy costs locked in for the remainder of the school year, providing short-term stability despite broader market uncertainty. Electricity rates are secured through October 2026, while both diesel fuel for buses and heating oil are locked in through June 2026, covering the academic year. However, natural gas has not been locked in, as it has not historically been advantageous to do so, leaving some exposure to fluctuating prices. Looking ahead, there is significant concern about future energy costs, as market conditions are described as highly unstable, with suppliers unable to guarantee pricing and electricity rates, in particular, are expected to rise. Overall, while the district is protected for now, uncertainty in global energy markets could pose budget challenges in the future.

Mr. Colehour asked whether current-year spending trends, such as outplacement transportation running significantly over budget, might affect the final budget adopted by the Board of Education once the Town Council returns its funding number.

Ms. Taylor explained that certain budget lines, particularly out-of-district placements, are highly dependent on individual students and their specific program placements. The administration builds the budget by reviewing each student's placement and whether they are expected to graduate from those programs. Because no students are anticipated to exit those placements next year, the district budgeted approximately $3.6 million in that category, making it difficult to reduce since the expenses are largely fixed and mandated. She also noted that transportation costs were increased to account for an additional bus required due to routing needs and school locations following redistricting. While transportation typically increases at a more predictable percentage annually, this year's adjustments were more complex due to those changes, though the expectation is that costs may stabilize in future years once routing becomes more consistent.

Dr. Solan added that final budget allocations are influenced by a variety of factors, including prior-year spending trends as well as broader external conditions. While past performance helps inform projections, many variables, such as weather events, economic conditions, and unexpected cost increases, can significantly impact spending after the budget is adopted.

He emphasized that although the budget is built around specific account lines, it must remain flexible because circumstances can change throughout the year. A large portion of the budget is fixed, approximately 80% tied to staffing and about 95% overall committed to contractual or required expenses, leaving only a small percentage available for adjustments. This limited flexibility requires the district to shift funds within that remaining portion to respond to unforeseen needs, such as higher-than-expected transportation or operational costs.

II. Medical Benefits Update

Ms. Taylor reported that the beginning balance (as of 7/1/25) for the Reserve Fund was $2,822,465. As of February 28, 2026, the Medical Benefits Reserve Fund balance is in a good position with a balance of $2,553,833, compared to $2,031,786 in February 2025. In February 2026, claims totaled $1,107,637 representing a 17% increase ($164,737) compared to February 2025, when claims were $942,900. The Medical Benefits Fund remains in a stable position, with 2.0 claim months in reserve as of February 28, 2026, exactly at the target of two months, and significantly up from the 1.71 claim months in February 2025.

The administration noted that the district will be in a better position to make informed adjustments after receiving the final allocation from the Town Council, as more up-to-date information will be available at that time. They acknowledged that while they aim to make thoughtful recommendations based on current data, uncertainty remains, and the district must be prepared to adapt as conditions evolve.

C. PERSONNEL

I. Report on Meeting Held March 4, 2026

Ms. Cullinan reported that the Committee met in executive session to discussion the Superintendent's evaluation.

D. PLANNING

I. Report on Meeting Held March 19, 2026

Mr. Ecke noted that the primary focus is advancing The Capital Expenditure Plan with the goal of moving it out of Committee in April and bringing it to the full Board for consideration in May. As part of the discussion, updates were provided on several facilities projects. The weight room renovation was reviewed, including plans to proceed with HVAC improvements while retaining the existing floor, which was determined to be in good condition. During construction, the weight room will be temporarily relocated to the maintenance garage.

Significant discussion centered on the proposed track and field project. Representatives from SLR presented preliminary design concepts, emphasizing that the existing track infrastructure is over 30 years old and that it would be more efficient to address both the track and turf replacement together rather than as separate projects. The proposal includes potential safety enhancements, such as improvements to field event areas. The committee was informed that additional details and cost estimates will be forthcoming, and members were invited to submit questions for further clarification. The project is currently planned for inclusion in the first year of the capital budget, with the expectation that it would go to referendum in November for potential implementation the following year.

Preliminary cost estimates for the combined track and turf project were discussed, with early projections in the range of approximately $1.7 to $1.8 million, not including optional upgrades such as a shock pad. The discussion also acknowledged ongoing considerations related to athlete safety, including surface performance and injury prevention. Ms. Taylor added that global market shifts, including conflicts in the Middle East, are causing turf prices to fluctuate. The project is significantly more complex than a simple surface replacement; Mark Ecke explained that the track renovation requires excavating down to the stone and asphalt layers to meet modern standards. Furthermore, several existing facilities—including the track fencing, the shot put pit, and the discus circle—are currently out of compliance with safety and regulation standards. While the possibility of returning to natural grass was raised, Taylor argues against it, noting that grass requires a high initial and yearly investment while offering only 25 hours of use per week. In contrast, synthetic turf provides nearly limitless usage, which is essential given the school's lack of additional field space to allow natural grass to rest. Ms. Rosenberg asked about the financial and logistical logic of completing the track and turf replacements simultaneously rather than as separate projects. Ms. Taylor explained that while synthetic turf typically lasts 12 to 15 years, the track has a longer 21-year lifecycle that requires specific maintenance intervals at years 7 and 14 to remain viable. Because both current surfaces have exceeded their recommended lifespans, the maintenance options for the track have been exhausted, making a full replacement necessary. Although an itemized cost list from SLR is pending, Taylor emphasized that there is a significant economy of scale in doing both projects at once, as labor and mobilization costs would likely increase if the work were split over different years.

E. POLICY

I. Report on Meeting Held March 2, 2026.

Mr. Ecke reported that at the meeting the committee discussed policies for a second and third reading.

II. Second Reading of Policy #5111.3 Protection of Undocumented Students

Mr. Ecke said there was a lengthy discussion on this policy. He explained that the committee is looking for feedback from the full Board. Mr. White and Mr. Colehour argue against the policy. Mr. White cites concerns that its adoption could jeopardize $2 million in federal funding by labeling the district as a "sanctuary" entity, especially under a vindictive federal administration. Mr. Colehour said the district already follows these procedures and is not legally mandated by the state to adopt them, a formal policy offers no "upside" and only increases litigation risk if a future action deviates slightly from the written text. In contrast, Dr. Harrigan emphasizes the "human value" of the proposal, arguing that formalizing these protections provides necessary emotional security for families who currently feel "under attack." She suggests that if the policy makes even a few families feel safer and more supported, it is a worthwhile endeavor regardless of the administrative redundancies.

Ms. Fitzgerald added that whether it's mandated or not, she agrees with Dr. Harrigan that it will signal to families what we do have a plan in place.

Ms. Cullinan reiterated the number of multilingual families we have in our district, and this could help families feel more secure. Ms. Rosenberg added that as a district, you can't promote SEL without considering the SEL components within this policy. She encouraged Board members to reach out to Mr. Ecke with any comments they may have.

III. Third Reading and Approval of Policies

Mr. Ecke reviewed the following policies for a third read and approval:
1312.4/6161.13 Library Collection Development & Maintenance
1312.5/6161.14 Library Display and Program
5141.5 Suicide Prevention and Intervention
Bylaw 9040 Board Related Responsibilities
Bylaw 9400 Monitoring Products and Processes

MOTION by Mr. Ecke, seconded by Dr. Harrigan.

> **MOVED** *that the Cheshire Board of Education give a third and final reading to Policies: 1312.4/6161.13 Library Collection Development & Maintenance; 1312.5/6161.14 Library Display and Program; 5141.5 Suicide Prevention and Intervention; Bylaw*

9040 Board Related Responsibilities, and Bylaw 9400 Monitoring Products and Processes, and direct the Superintendent to put said policies into immediate effect.

VOTE: The Motion passed unanimously by those present.

F. OTHER STANDING COMMITTEES
None.

5. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

MOTION by Mr. White and seconded by Mr. Colehour.

MOVED *that the Cheshire Board of Education approve the Minutes from meetings held February 19 and March 5, 2026.*

VOTE: The Motion passed unanimously by those present.

6. CORRESPONDENCE
There was no correspondence.

7. SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT
Dr. Solan began by honoring Board Member Appreciation Month and acknowledging the complexity of the current legislative session, which includes proposed laws regarding PE credits, homeschooling, ECS grants, and a significant shift in the kindergarten start age. Despite this "frantic" pace, the district secured its third $50,000 grant for "Connecticut Grown for Connecticut Kids," which will fund new kitchen equipment and a Farm to School event. The Superintendent detailed the "You Belong Here" initiative at Cheshire High School, where peer health educators are being trained to mentor elementary students on leadership and positive school climate, creating a sustainable legacy of student-led community building.

On the facilities front, construction at Barnum and Norton is progressing rapidly, featuring new playscapes, lockers, and scoreboards. To support the upcoming transition, the district is planning "New Friends Day" in June to help students bond with their future peers. Assistant Superintendent Silano added that professional development days are focusing on helping staff from merging schools build a unified foundational culture. Dr. Solan noted, the district is moving forward with an energy performance contract, having submitted grants for solar projects across six schools and working to close financing by the end of April.

8. OLD BUSINESS
None.

9. <u>NEW BUSINESS</u>

A. <u>Healthy Food Certification</u>

Ms. Taylor explained that Connecticut General Statutes requires that all Connecticut public school districts that are eligible to participate in the healthy food certification take action to certify whether all food items sold to students will or will not meet the Connecticut Nutrition Standards. It is the recommendation of Administration that the Board vote that they will meet Connecticut Nutrition Standards for the 2026/27 school year with the exclusions noted below.

MOTION by Dr. Harrigan and seconded by Ms. Cullinan.

> MOVED that Pursuant to C.G.S. Section 10-215f, the Cheshire Board of Education certifies that all food items offered for sale to students in the schools under its jurisdiction, and not exempted from the Connecticut Nutrition Standards published by the Connecticut State Department of Education, will comply with the Connecticut Nutrition Standards during the period of July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2027. This certification shall include all food offered for sale to students separately from reimbursable meals at all times and from all sources, including but not limited to, school stores, vending machines, school cafeterias, culinary programs, and any fundraising activities on school premises sponsored by the school or by non-school organizations and groups.

VOTE: The Motion passed unanimously 7-0.

MOTION by Ms. Cullinan and seconded by Dr. Harrigan.

> **MOVED** *that the Cheshire Board of Education will allow the sale to students of food items that do not meet the Connecticut Nutrition Standards provided that the following conditions are met: 1) the sale is in connection with an event occurring after the end of the regular school day or on the weekend; 2) the sale is at the location of the event; and 3) the food items are not sold from a vending machine or school store. An "event" is an occurrence that involves more than just a regularly scheduled practice, meeting, or extracurricular activity. For example, soccer games, school plays, and interscholastic debates are events but soccer practices, play rehearsals, and debate team meetings are not. The "regular school day" is the period from midnight before to 30 minutes after the end of the official school day. "Location" means where the event is being held, and must be the same place as the food sales.*

VOTE: The Motion passed unanimously 7-0.

MOTION by Mr. Colehour and seconded by Dr. Harrigan.

MOVED *that the Cheshire Board of Education will allow the sale to students of beverages not listed in Section 10-221q of the Connecticut General Statutes provided that the following conditions are met: 1) the sale is in connection with an event occurring after the end of the regular school day or on the weekend; 2) the sale is at the location of the event; and 3) the beverages are not sold from a vending machine or school store. An "event" is an occurrence that involves more than just a regularly scheduled practice, meeting or extracurricular activity. The "school day" is the period from midnight before to 30 minutes after the end of the official school day. "Location" means where the event is being held, and must be the same place as the beverage sales.*

VOTE: The Motion passed unanimously 7-0.

B. <u>Chairperson's Update</u>

C. <u>Announcement of Upcoming Meetings</u>

10. <u>ADJOURNMENT</u>

On a motion by Mr. White, and seconded by Dr. Harrigan, the meeting was adjourned at 10:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

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Samantha Rosenberg, Board Chair

Attest:

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Carol K. Jesensky, Board of Education Clerk

Filed at the Town Clerk's Office, Town Hall, Cheshire: _______________.