



FAIRHAVEN SCHOOL COMMITTEE MINUTES
JOINT MEETING WITH THE SELECT BOARD & FINANCE COMMITTEE
March 31, 2026

FAIRHAVEN TOWN CLERK
RCUD 2026 AUG 13 AM8:19

MEMBERS PRESENT: Brian Monroe, Nicole Pacheco, Stephanie Pickup, Kelly Ochoa, Donna McKenna

MEMBERS NOT PRESENT: Erik Andersen

STAFF PRESENT: Superintendent Tara Kohler, School Business Manager Nicole Potter

OTHERS PRESENT: Members of the Fairhaven Select Board & Finance Committee, Town Administrator

The meeting was called to order by Mr. Monroe at 7:05 pm.

Mr. Hickey apologized for the miscommunication with the Superintendent at the previous joint meeting and the frustration caused by their respective figures coming from different sources. He said that he and Superintendent Kohler met subsequently to realign and he emphasized improved collaboration to support budget decisions with a renewed commitment to sharing consistent and accurate information moving forward.

The FY27 operating budget numbers represent the work done to be a level service budget and meet Net School Spending (NSS), the number of \$26,530,067 is approximately \$18,000 over the projected NSS figure. Mr. Hickey asked the Finance Committee and School Committee to consider supporting the School operating budget of \$26,530,067. This number allows the Town to bring forth a budget article that would meet NSS projections without an override. Reviewing the impact to services eliminated would take place before Town Meeting.

Superintendent Kohler asked what the source of one of the handouts given was. Mr. Elliott said it was distributed by Mr. Souza of the Finance Committee who said it was from a resident in Fairhaven. Superintendent Kohler cautioned against relying on it as the numbers are wrong, for example, they include millions in grant funds and she would need time to review it.

Superintendent Kohler then reviewed and addressed clarifying questions about education costs in a presentation (attachment A). Discussion continued on the proposed school override amount of \$481,376 in article 9. Superintendent Kohler reviewed potential use of funds if an override passes. Discussion continued regarding the Tripp School, the Southeastern Massachusetts Educational Collaborative (SMEC) programs that Fairhaven participates in with other towns, and the cost to Fairhaven to rent the facility being offset by the savings of the collaborative rates versus paying non-collaborative or out-of-district rates. While the lease is not a "triple net lease," other SMEC member towns have similar expenses for the facilities they maintain. Discussion included Capital Project requests and other potential sources of funding for projects like Community Preservation funds (CPC), auditing of SMEC figures, whether SMEC receives federal funding, and other potential options of selling the building to SMEC for an agreement in perpetuity.

Mr. Hickey asked the Finance Committee and Select Board to first vote on the amount of money for the School operating budget in Article 8 and then move to the override article and determine, if there is support for an override, what the amount for Article 9 is.

Ms. Mello motioned to approve the amount of \$26,530,067 for the education budget for Fairhaven Public Schools, Mr. Saunders seconded, motion passed unanimously (5-0).

Superintendent Kohler suggested the School Committee consider the same motion. Mr. Hickey said he did not think it was necessary because the Select Board and Finance Committee are voting on warrant articles and asked Mr. Elliott if the Finance Committee would vote on the School Department funding in Article 8. Mr. Elliott asked for clarification on the General Fund budget figures because of the difference of \$150,000 he has. Mr. Hickey explained there was a reduction of \$150,000 in the Town Insurance appropriation that he and Ms. Carreiro came to after further review with the Town's Health Insurance Consultant and that amount was moved to the School Department. Due to the Finance Committee not voting on the School Department budget, Mr. Hickey explained they would need to reconsider their vote on the Non-Departmental Budget first.

Mr. Elliott opened the floor for questions from the Finance Committee members about Article 8's reduction in Non-Departmentals moved to the Schools. Mr. Riley asked if the Finance Committee could take this up at the Finance Committee meeting on Thursday. Mr. Hickey explained the reason for the joint meeting tonight and that waiting until Thursday eliminates the ability, as a group, to debate, discuss and decide on the amount. Mr. Elliott polled the members about moving to a vote tonight on the School budget in Article 8. Clarifying questions were asked about the process of voting the School budget in Article 8, the status of Acushnet students due to their agreement with Old Rochester and details about Acushnet student enrollment. Mr. Monroe said the School Committee held their first meeting with Acushnet tonight and they do not anticipate a major change to student enrollment for the coming school year and that they will continue to work with Acushnet on an agreement for future years.

Discussion ensued about NSS. Mr. Elliott asked for further verification of the numbers in the handout from Mr. Souza. Mr. Elliott asked the Finance Committee if they were ready to move forward with a vote on the operating budget with the new information received tonight and they would vote on Thursday.

A motion was made by Mrs. Pacheco to certify the non-override figure of \$26,530,067, seconded by Mrs. Pickup, passed unanimously by the School Committee present (5-0).

A motion to adjourn was made by Mrs. Ochoa, seconded by Mrs. Pickup, passed unanimously (5-0). The meeting adjourned at 9:35 pm.

Sheri Souza
Secretary to the School Committee

Approved May 20, 2026

Finance Committee Questions

March 23, 2026

Several members have asked about the growth of SPED students enrolled. This is to understand the growing cost of education while student enrollment has gone down.

SEE CHART:

	Total Enrollment	In District Special Education	SpEd % of Total Enrollment
Oct 2025	1679	278	16.56%
Oct 2024	1727	304	17.60%
Oct 2023	1759	312	17.74%
Oct 2022	1826	316	17.31%
Oct 2021	1846	284	15.38%
Oct 2020	1918	301	15.69%
Oct 2019	2042	340	16.65%
Oct 2018	2025	314	15.51%
Oct 2017	2052	293	14.28%
Oct 2016	2024	272	13.44%
Oct 2015	2031	270	13.29%
Oct 2014	1999	275	13.76%

My questions are around the Tripp School. I have been informed of another \$700,000 HVAC system need next year. SMEC appears to provide a needed service for not only Fairhaven, but other schools. But with \$1,400,000 in cost, is there an alternative option to educating students than the Tripp location?

SEE CHART:

# Students	SMEC	Non-Member Collaborative (If room)	Private Day Option 1 (If room)	Private Day Option 2 (If room)
11	\$713,240	\$1,019,260	\$1,061,500	\$1,211,100
Increase annually		\$306,020	\$348,260	\$497,860
Increase per student		\$27,820	\$31,660	\$45,260

March 25, 2026

Family Center Liaison was introduced to the budget a few years ago via a grant. We are no longer receiving grant money for this service. We have been told that it's a social service. This center has no impact on educating our children, however it's been integrated into the school budget and the taxpayers are expected to pay the tab. Why is this part of the school budget for \$64,945? Shouldn't this be part of the state run welfare system funded by state taxes?

The FPS Family Resource Center provides much-needed resources and support to our students and families. The Family Center also serves as a key liaison and facilitator of all services for students in need of additional support, whether it be food insecurity, financial challenges, or other factors that create barriers to accessing educational programs. The Family Center also serves as a key facilitator and liaison for all McKinney-Vento determinations as well as Best Interest Determination meetings. These are essential to ensure that students have safe and unfettered access to their education. The Family Center serves as a facilitator for wraparound support services for students, including school-based counseling, therapeutic mentorship, and communication with Child and Family Services. Additionally, the Family Center serves as a connection to outside organizations that donate resources, including holiday assistance, extra school supplies (i.e. backpacks), clothing, food, gift cards, and other generous support provided by the greater Fairhaven community. The Family Center works to ensure access for families whose home language is not English and supports translation services across the district based on student/family need. The Family Center also provides support for parent programming as well as our After-School Enrichment Programming for grades K-12. Last year, over 1,200 students cumulatively participated across the five enrichment sessions of the school year.

Last year we appropriated \$175,000 to replace the elevator in the High School, and was told it was critical for the safety of the students. However, we were not presented a survey conducted by a professional to determine if, in fact, it was unsafe. We were given the reason that the elevator was 20 years old and parts were not available. The elevator was operable then and is still operable. Up to this point, the elevator has still not been replaced and we were told the job is out for bid. If it was so urgent, where did the school department get the figure of \$175,000? Where are the bids a year later? Should that money could be taken back to fund our deficit until we get a hard quote?

That is a moot point for FY27, but we thank the town meeting members for approving the expenditure, and we are in the process now to try to have the project completed by the start of the school year. The elevator is not operational at this time, and we are grateful to have the ability to remedy this sooner than waiting another year. We used the figure of \$175,000 as an estimate, as it was a rough estimate when getting approval, and costs have gone up. The two most recent quotes received: \$173,750.00 and \$207,470.

How many children are special needs and/or on IEPs in the school system?

See Chart:

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Total district enrollment has declined by about 18% since 2019 (from 2,042 students to 1,679). During the same period, the number of students requiring Special Education services has remained relatively stable.

Because of this, Special Education students now make up a larger share of the district—typically 16–18% of all students today, compared to 13–14% a decade ago. This shift is driven primarily by a denominator effect: the overall student population has decreased, but the number of students with IEPs has not.

Over the past decade, the district has moved from about 1 in 7 students receiving Special Education services to about 1 in 6.

As a result, staffing needs for Special Education do not decrease in proportion to declining enrollment.

	High Needs (Total)
Oct 2025	46.9%
Oct 2024	47.8%
Oct 2023	48.2%
Oct 2022	48.9%
Oct 2021	49.0%
Oct 2020	42.4%
Oct 2019	39.5%
Oct 2018	38.9%
Oct 2017	38.6%
Oct 2016	38.1%
Oct 2015	36.1%
Oct 2014	33.4%

From DESE: High Needs is calculated based on the number of High Needs students, divided by the adjusted enrollment. A student is included in the High Needs group if he or she is designated as either Low Income (prior to 2015, and from 2022 to present), Economically Disadvantaged (from 2015 to 2021), English Learner or Former English Learner, or a Student with Disabilities. A Former English Learner is a student who is not currently an English Learner, but had been at some point in the four previous academic years.

Also, who determines whether or not a student should be on an IEP and what is the criteria?

The parent/guardian/caregiver(s) may make a request for a special education evaluation by writing a letter to the teacher or building administration at the school their child attends. It is wise to date the request and keep a record copy. The parent/guardian/caregiver(s) may also verbally request a referral; however, a letter provides proof that a referral was indeed made. Upon the receipt of the request for evaluation, a representative from the District will contact the parent/guardian/caregiver(s) regarding the request for an evaluation. The representative and parent/guardian/caregiver(s) will discuss the reasons for the request. After the discussion for the evaluation, the same process outlined above would then be followed. If the parents disagree with the team's decision regarding the evaluation, they may refuse consent or exercise their due process rights.

When Fairhaven Public Schools receives a request for an Evaluation for Special Education from a teacher, parent/guardian/caregiver(s), or other agencies, then the following steps are followed:

- The district must respond to requests within five school working days.
- The assigned School Psychologist will contact the parent/guardian/caregiver(s) to discuss specific concerns (academic, intellectual, behavioral, social/emotional, etc.).
- Evaluations are conducted within a 30-school-day timeline, and a meeting is scheduled by the 45th school day timeline to review evaluations and discuss eligibility.
- Meeting members must include, but not be limited to, the following: parent/guardian/caregiver(s), School Psychologist, Classroom Teacher, Special Education Case Manager, and other professional staff as needed.

Parent/guardian/caregiver(s) have the right to participate in their child's IEP meeting and in the decision-making process as an equal partner. Students should be included whenever possible or appropriate, especially during transition planning, which begins at the age of fourteen.

Parent/guardian/caregiver(s) may bring persons of their choice to the meeting for additional support, including private specialists, advocates, family members, and friends. An interpreter will be supplied if needed.

At the start of the meeting, all participants are introduced. Parent/Guardian/Caregiver(s) are provided a copy of the "Parent's Notice of Procedural Safeguards" prior to the meeting. The team members should clarify the purpose for the meeting as stated on the invitation. All decisions made at the meeting will be summarized on the Notice of Proposed School District Action (N1) or Refusal to Act (N2). The actions recommended by the team, the actions considered but not recommended

by the team and any actions refused by the district should be clearly stated on the N1 or N2 parent/guardian/caregiver(s) should check that their agreement or disagreement with the team recommendation is accurately recorded.

The parent/guardian/caregiver(s) may call an additional meeting to discuss concerns/questions of the IEP or refusal to act. A parent/guardian/caregiver(s) signature is required for the IEP to be implemented. A parent/guardian/caregiver(s) has 30 days to sign an IEP.

The purpose of the Initial IEP team meeting is to:

- Initiate and discuss evaluations and educational progress including attendance report, report card, district-wide benchmark testing, progress reports, and any other available educational evidence.
- Listen to parent concerns.
- Determine eligibility for special education services.
- Develop the Individualized Education Program if eligible (IEP).
- Review or revise interventions if an IEP is not warranted.
- Refer for 504 if the child is found to have a disability, but does not require specially designed instruction or related services.

If eligible, an IEP will be developed. If not eligible, the Notice of School District Refusal to Act (N2) letter will be written and mailed home.

If the student is found eligible and an IEP is developed, special education services will begin upon receiving signed acceptance of the IEP. A summary of the proposed IEP will be provided to the parent/guardian/caregiver after the meeting.

March 29, 2026

School Budget

When the state aid is dispersed in June/July will the difference be refunded or recouped to the general fund?

As of now, we have tentatively agreed that we would add that to the school dept. budget.

What is the impact of the ORR/Acushnet agreement on net school spending and the budget?

We don't know yet, but for FY27, we anticipate stable revenues for Acushnet Tuition.

With varying budget figures on the table, can you provide an explanation of how a student's education will potentially be harmed? For instance, consolidation of preschools and increased elementary school class sizes.

Too early to tell. Will be reviewing final Special Education costs and move-ins to determine next steps for calculating class size projections.

Tripp School

Can you provide a written explanation of the value of the SMEC services provided to Fairhaven Public Schools?

SMEC is an extension of ten public school systems, which make up its membership. The present membership includes the Acushnet, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, Fall River, Marion, Mattapoisett, New Bedford, Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School, Rochester, and Old Rochester Regional public school districts. SMEC accepts students for enrollment in its programs from school systems throughout Southeastern Massachusetts. The Collaborative's programs and services are locally based and locally directed and are designed to supplement the special education resources of its member districts. Each district has an arrangement for rental options to keep costs down for all districts. It's a collaborative endeavor that provides an opportunity for students from our district. Our students are eligible for the following programs:

Elementary School Programs:

SMEC's Early Childhood Program serves students PK-K with autism spectrum disorder and similar needs. Students are taught in a substantially separate classroom with a small student/staff ratio and highly trained, specialized staff.

SMEC's Therapeutic Learning Program TLP serves students in grades K-5 with social/emotional, behavioral, and learning disabilities, with a substantially separate classroom and inclusion opportunities.

The SMEC Multidisciplinary Learning Center is new Collaborative special education program offering students with significant physical and medical needs a safe and supportive learning environment.

The SMEC Therapeutic Learning Center was created at the request of several of our member districts as an alternative educational option for young students whose social, emotional, and/or behavioral needs are interfering with their ability to learn within a traditional classroom setting.

The Primary Language Program supports students in the elementary grades with a variety of learning needs, including Autism Spectrum Disorders, cognitive, sensory, and language-based differences.

Middle School Programs:

The Integrated Services Program supports middle school students with a variety of learning needs, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorders, as well as cognitive, sensory, and language-based differences.

The Alternative Learning Classroom serves the needs of middle school students with social/emotional disabilities, ADHD, specific learning disabilities and/or behavioral issues.

High School Program:

The SMEC Multidisciplinary Learning Center is a new Collaborative special education program offering students with significant physical and medical needs a safe and supportive learning environment.

The Integrated Services Program supports students in grades 9-12 with a variety of learning needs, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorders, cognitive, sensory, and language-based differences.

The Alternative Learning Classroom II serves the needs of high school students in grades 9-12 with social/emotional disabilities, ADHD, specific learning disabilities and/or behavioral issues.

Transitional and Vocational Programs:

The SMEC TVA is a comprehensive assessment tool consisting of several components.

SMEC's Transitional Services Program TSP is designed to facilitate the transition of students ages 14-21 from school to work and from home to community.

Adult Program:

Supporting Adults for Inclusive Living Program (SAIL) is the Collaborative's adult services component. SAIL has been designed to offer a broad range of specialized support services to facilitate the transition of young adults with developmental disabilities from school to work and from home to community.

Can you provide a copy of the written agreement between SMEC and FPS that outlines the "in-kind" services provided in lieu of rent for the Tripp School.

To be a part of the collaborative, districts offer space for programs to run. Any increase in proposed rent would also increase tuition for years to come.

Can you provide a cost comparison of SMEC at the Tripp School vs SMEC vacating the Tripp School?

Yes, educating the same group of students who are currently at SMEC would cost in excess of \$1,000,000 at the next most reasonable option.

March 30, 2026 - From John Clancy

It is my understanding that the schools do not charge a participation fee to play a sport? Why is that ? Considering most towns have been doing for years.

I was a High School basketball coach at Bellingham High School, for 15 years. Bellingham started charging players to pay a fee to play back in 1986, because of severe budget constraints. Considering the current situation here in Fairhaven, why has this never been implemented?

For the athletes whose families didn't have the funds ,they were given an exemption.

It's time to adapt, like many other towns throughout Ma.

Bathroom

Is there no mirror in handicap bath?

Assuming this question is referring to the FHS Alumni field. I am not sure about the mirror but am happy to check.

Has building commissioner approved 3 bathrooms or more?

Last we knew he was advising approximately 10 per gender. That said, we are scheduled to meet to get a more specific number.

Are there urinals for men?

I believe there would be in the final affixed restrooms, but right now we are using port-a-jons.

Expected completion date? *Unknown*

Is the use of port-a-johns a more economical solution? *Yes but not acceptable according to Building Commissioner*