Jennifer Patterson chaired the meeting in the absence of the Committee Chairperson. The meeting was called to order at 5:52 p.m. Tom Croteau was appointed to be a Committee member for this meeting.

Superintendent Forsten provided an overview of the number of elementary classroom teachers currently projected to be needed for the 2017-2018 school year. This information may be helpful as the Board considers new programs. Superintendent Forsten noted that, based on current enrollment projections, a total of 91 elementary classroom teachers is anticipated to be needed for next year, a reduction of 3 teachers.

Committee members discussed class size. Superintendent Forsten noted that all classes would be within the Board’s class size guidelines. A larger 4th grade class at Beaver Meadow School, currently divided within three classrooms, would continue to be divided into three classrooms as fifth graders. The class sizes would remain within, although on the higher end of, Board guidelines. Superintendent Forsten noted that she has discussed these projections with the elementary principals and found that the principals and their teachers are comfortable with them.

Ms. Patterson indicated that the purpose of the meeting was to review options for early childhood programming in case the budget situation does not allow for full-day kindergarten for all students in Concord, which is the Committee’s first choice and was endorsed by the Board. The administration will prepare a budget that will include full-day kindergarten, which will be considered by the Board beginning in January. The Instructional Committee would like to establish a ‘Plan B’ that will provide the administration with guidance for budgeting purposes if full-day kindergarten is not feasible.

Superintendent Forsten reviewed several early childhood education options previously discussed by the committee.

Option 1: Half-day Kindergarten and Early Childhood: This option provides a half-day kindergarten program for all students, with selected kindergarten students and
four-year-olds coming together for a multi-age half day. Under this option approximately 90 kindergarteners would receive a full-day school program, and 90 four-year-olds would receive a half-day program. Students selected for the multi-age half-day program would fall into risk categories, including students learning English, students eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and children with identified special education needs. Students would attend their neighborhood schools. This would cost roughly $685,738, without transportation costs included.

Committee members noted the strengths and weaknesses of this model. On the one hand, it does not meet the need for a full-day program for all students described by parents who spoke to the Board. It does not provide kindergarten teachers a full day with their students as they would prefer. It does not provide for a heterogeneous group of students in the half-day four- and five-year-old program. It does raise administrative complexities around a selection process for students. On the positive side, it does provide early childhood learning opportunities for about one-third of Concord four-year-olds, something that is strongly supported by research. It also provides a full day of programming for the one-third of students who are most in need. The half-day mixed age program is not likely to become a program that is like first grade, a concern described in the literature.

Option 2: Half-Day Kindergarten and Preschool: This option would provide a half-day kindergarten program for all students, and a half-day four-year-old preschool program for 150-200 children. Two half-day preschool sections would be offered daily at Abbot-Downing, Christa McAuliffe and Beaver Meadow Schools, and four half-day sections would be offered at Mill Brook School. The number of students impacted is a best guess about how many might be interested in participating. This program’s projected costs would be $685,738, without transportation costs. Superintendent Forsten noted that the District would not be required to offer transportation, although charging a sliding fee could be considered. It is possible that some of these students could be accommodated on the kindergarten buses.

This option would not impact kindergarten students, but does provide significant preschool programming, with benefits described in research.

Option 3: Combination Half-Day and Full-Day Kindergarten: This option would involve offering one full-day kindergarten classroom at each of the K-5 schools, and two full-day classrooms at Mill Brook School. Students would be selected based on current demographic proportions, with slots allocated for students learning English and students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The remainder of the students in the classes would come from the general population of students and would be chosen using a lottery system. This would provide for a heterogeneous group in each full-day classroom. This option would impact 90 students, or approximately one-third of the total. The cost for this program would be $386,475, or slightly less than one-third the cost of full-day kindergarten.

Maureen Redmond-Scura noted that many students are already able to access preschool, either through the school district or community options. She is aware from
her visit to kindergarten classes that there are some kindergarten students who really need more time. She noted her comfort with the heterogeneous aspect of the grouping in the third option, that this could be used as a pilot program and that, if the budget does not support the full-day option for all, at least those students most in need would receive a full day. Ms. Redmond-Scura also noted that the model of selecting some students for programming and then opening slots up to others is one the District currently uses in its preschool program, and which seems to work well.

Jim Richards pointed out that parents need to sign up for community early childhood programs fairly early in the year, and wondered how the lottery process would proceed given this timeline. Clint Cogswell noted that procedures for accessing programming would not be available until after the budget is passed, and unfortunately, this timing might be difficult for some parents.

Mr. Croteau asked whether there might be options beyond the lottery to decide access for the general student population for the third option. Mr. Cogswell noted that without a more objective system like a lottery, principals may feel pressured by the process of allocating classroom slots.

Mr. Croteau noted that transportation is already available, so the third option would not require additional funds for transportation.

Superintendent Forsten also presented the full-day kindergarten model, which would cost approximately $1.2 million. This model includes three part-time teachers who would travel together to each of the four schools, providing lessons for students while their teachers each have daily 45-minute planning periods. Ms. Redmond-Scura noted that, with the exception of the one-time budget for classroom furnishings, the remainder of the budget would be continuing annual costs for the District. Superintendent Forsten noted that most of the costs of programming are related to personnel, which are continuing and annually growing expenditures.

Mr. Richards noted that the Committee had previously discussed another option, one that involved providing full-day kindergarten for all students at one elementary school. Mr. Cogswell indicated that he could not support this option, as it would create problems in selecting just one school. Ms. Patterson noted that she had considered this idea when there was a possibility that the District’s preschool program at Mill Brook School would need to move to make room for kindergarten there. This is no longer the case—there is room for the preschool programs to remain at MBS even with additional kindergarten classrooms.

Committee members noted that they still prefer the full-day kindergarten option for all students, if the budget can support this. They agreed that the combination of half-day and full-day kindergarten, the third option, is their preferred option for ‘Plan B.’ Ms. Patterson would like the Committee to continue to consider preschool programming, but noted that perhaps this is not the time for that. There are many options currently offered within the District and in the community. Committee members noted that they do not want to take away from what is currently happening. Some of the District
options are supported by grants, and there may be a discussion about sustainability in the future.

Mr. Cogswell noted that in the best case scenario, there might be additional funds from the State for kindergarten for the 2018-2019 school year, but not before. Superintendent Forsten noted that, as she presented at the beginning of the meeting, the elementary schools will need three fewer teachers next year, a savings of approximately $273,000.

Ms. Patterson noted that this would cover a large portion of the cost of the third option, the combination of full-day and half-day programming.

The Committee voted 4-0 to identify the plan that provides for a combination of full-day and part-day kindergarten programming in each school as its back-up plan in case the budget does not support full-day kindergarten for all students (motioned by Ms. Redmond-Scura, seconded by Mr. Croteau).

The Committee voted 4-0 to adjourn (motioned by Ms. Patterson, seconded by Mr. Croteau).

The meeting adjourned at 6:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Patterson, Chair

Donna Palley, Recorder