

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETINGS

All regular and special meetings of the School Committee shall be open to the public. Executive sessions will be held only as prescribed by the Statutes of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The School Committee desires members of the Mansfield school community to attend its meetings so that they may become better acquainted with the operations and the programs of the Mansfield Public Schools. In addition, the Committee would like the opportunity to hear the wishes and ideas of members of the Mansfield school community on matters within the scope of their authority. These matters include the budget for the Mansfield Public Schools, the performance of the Superintendent, and the educational goals and policies of the Mansfield Public Schools.

Those who wish to be heard before the Committee have a chance and to ensure the ability of the Committee to conduct the District's business in an orderly manner, the following rules and procedures are adopted consistent with state and federal free speech laws:

1. At the start of each regularly scheduled School Committee meeting, individuals or group representatives who have signed up to speak in person or virtually will be invited to address the Committee during its 15-minute public comment period, which shall be known as Public Speak. Public Speak shall occur prior to discussion of Agenda items, unless the Chair determines that there is a good reason for rearranging the order at a public meeting that is unrelated to deterring participation in Public Speak.
2. All speakers must conduct themselves in a peaceable and orderly manner. In addition, they are encouraged, but not required, to present their remarks in a respectful manner.
3. Speakers must begin their remarks by stating their name, town or city of residence, and affiliation. All remarks will be addressed through the Chair of the meeting.
4. Public Speak is not a discussion, debate, or dialogue between individuals and the School Committee. It is an individual's opportunity to express an opinion on issues within the scope of the School Committee's authority. Therefore, any comments involving staff members or students must concern the educational goals, policies, or budget of the Mansfield Public Schools, or the performance of the Superintendent. To ensure compliance with the Open Meeting Law, privacy laws, and other legal obligations, the Committee will not engage with a speaker or with one another in deliberation on comments as they are presented during Public Speak periods. Under most circumstances, administrative channels are the proper means for disposition of legitimate complaints involving staff members. At its discretion, the Committee may schedule issues raised by a speaker for deliberation at a future meeting.
5. Assuming that five (5) or fewer speakers sign up to engage in public comment, each speaker will be allowed three (3) minutes each to present their material. If six (6) or more speakers sign up to engage in public comment, then each speaker will be allowed two (2) minutes each to present their material. No more than six (6) speakers will be accommodated at any individual meeting

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6. Speakers may not assign their time to another speaker, and in general, extensions of time will not be permitted. However, speakers who require reasonable accommodations on the basis of a speech-related disability or who require language interpretation services may be allotted a total of five (5) minutes to present their material. Speakers must notify the School Committee by telephone or email at least 48 hours in advance of the meeting if they wish to request an extension of time for one of these reasons.
7. The Chair of the meeting may not interrupt speakers who have been recognized to speak, except that the Chair reserves the right to terminate speech which is not Constitutionally protected because it constitutes a true threat of violence or incites imminent lawless conduct by others. Verbal comments will also be curtailed once they exceed the time limits outlined in paragraphs 5 and 7 of this policy and/or to the extent they exceed the scope of the School Committee's authority.
8. In order to allow a peaceable and orderly meeting, no person may offer comment without permission of the Chair, and all persons shall, at the request of the Chair, be silent.
9. Disclaimer: Public Speak is not a time for debate or response to comments by the School Committee. Comments made at Public Speak do not reflect the views or the positions of the School Committee. Because of constitutional free speech principles, the School Committee does not have the authority to prevent all speech that may be upsetting and/or offensive at Public Speak.

Revised Date: October 24, 2023
 May 2, 2023
 March 26, 2019
 October 6, 2015

REFERENCES: Barron v. Southborough, Natick Public Schools; ACLU letter to the Mass.
 Municipal Lawyers Assoc. and Mass. Assoc. of School Committees

Murphy, Hesse, Toomey & Lehane, LLP

LEGAL REFS: M.G.L. 30A:18-25, Open Meeting Law
 940 CMR 29 Open Meeting Regulations

CROSS REF: BEC, Executive Sessions