

Board of Education
Communications Sub-Committee
March 10th, 2021
Virtual Meeting 1:00 p.m.

Minutes of meeting held virtually.

Present: D. Cruson
D. Zukowski
L. Rodrigue

1. Call to Order

Mr. Cruson called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM

2. New Business

- Discuss Budget newsletter
The committee reviewed Dr. Rodrigue's article and discussed questions and clarifications about various items.

The committee reviewed Ms. Zukowski's article, discussing questions on the content and refining wording.

3. Adjournment

Motion made by Mr. Cruson, 2nd Ms. Zukowski. Approved Unanimously. Adjourned at 2:30 PM

Respectfully submitted:

Daniel Cruson Jr.
Chair

A Responsible Design: Newtown's 2021-22 Budget

Newtown School leaders contemplated many factors as they prepared their budget requests for the 2021-22 school year. Despite the academic and financial issues we faced in response to COVID, my goal as superintendent was to design and communicate a responsible budget tied to our district's goals and priorities. Throughout the pandemic, Newtown educators and leaders bravely confronted abrupt changes to long-standing practices in teaching and learning. Classrooms functioned from homes, and teachers shifted familiar instructional strategies to engage students in a virtual learning environment. As a result of CT Dept. of Public Health (DPH) requirements and the district's Re-Entry Plan, COVID expenditures grew – close to 2 million dollars – which included PPE (personal protective equipment), air purifiers, hand sanitizers, and overtime for custodians and nurses. However, future needs in staffing, technology, and new programming were still necessary in our effort to sustain the quality of our educational system and make long-term improvements. Aside from fixed costs like salaries and energy, budget requests included hiring instructional specialists to mitigate learning loss, providing digital tools and resources, expanding world language, supporting efforts around diversity & equity, and offering meaningful professional development opportunities for staff.

When the annual budget development process began in the fall of 2020, leaders engaged in direct conversations about their requests in relation to our Strategic Plan and district priorities. Although attention still centered on the effects of remote and hybrid learning models on students and staff, three objectives in our Strategic Plan were integral to our students' long-term success: developing and demonstrating college, career, and global readiness skills; demonstrating character attributes for personal well-being and to become contributing members of the local and global communities; and ensuring all students had the opportunity to set and achieve personally challenging goals. In concert with our district goals, budget decisions also relied on information regarding enrollment, class size, staffing, and program needs. Although COVID had impacted our district unexpectedly, we remained focused on goals that would support our school system in the year ahead. Leaders in Newtown believed it was paramount to...

- Implement academic instructional strategies and social-emotional supports to address COVID-related influences on student learning and growth.
- Promote a culture of rigorous learning that fosters student engagement, deepens conceptual understanding, and provides appropriate transitions between grade levels.
- Embrace technology and digital resources that facilitate students' application of concepts and understanding of content.
- Ensure policies, protocols, and practices are implemented to address diversity and equity in the creation of a positive climate.
- Identify and fund training and professional development for staff.

While district goals remained at the forefront of our planning, budget conversations were equally focused on the impact that COVID would have on student and staff needs.

Given the assumption that the pandemic would continue to impact instruction and social emotional learning needs well into the fall, our decisions centered on our school populations. We could not fully plan for future needs without a thoughtful analysis of district enrollment. How many students did we expect in August of 2021? Would families feel comfortable returning students to our schools? What staffing adjustments might we have to make due to enrollment and class size? All of these questions played a role in our budget planning and would influence existing and new programs. More importantly, without the knowledge of what our district might still face in August of 2021, such as social distancing requirements and mitigation strategies mandated by the State, maintaining reasonable class sizes at all levels was a key decision. These class sizes would also help support students who had struggled academically during the pandemic.

Instructional Strategies and Social Emotional Supports

In the wake of expected learning deficits and isolation for some students during remote learning, instructional supports were key in the formulation of our budget. Following an assessment data report by our Director of Teaching and Learning during a BOE meeting in January, students' progress in math and, to a lesser degree reading, reflected a dip in scores on the NWEA, a standard formative assessment that measures growth and proficiency in grades 1-8. In response, school leaders, particularly at the elementary level, requested math and reading interventionists to provide support. These new staff members would collaborate with classroom teachers and work closely with students identified as struggling learners.

Additionally, the inclusion of a behavioral interventionist and increases in paraprofessional hours would help students cope with behavioral needs, anxiety, and disengagement given the trauma caused by a uniquely different school year. New special education teachers were added to staffing requests, primarily to support increased academic and social-emotional needs, and to deliver the services that were challenging to provide for this population throughout distance learning. While some service hours might be difficult to recoup, the development of a robust summer school and adequate staffing to meet students' IEP objectives in the fall were necessary budgetary items.

Student engagement, Conceptual understanding, and Transitions

During the budget presentation to the Board of Education in January, we pointed out that promoting a culture of rigorous learning, fostering student engagement, and building students' conceptual understanding were vital in sustaining the quality of our educational services. Changes in programming identified prior to the pandemic would provide timely benefits for our learners, and these adjustments would strengthen students' progress and growth as learners.

In pilot form at the time of the budget development, a new K-5 math program had also been accounted for in the operational plan. Most of the requests associated with the program encompassed textbooks and digital resources, as well as the training for elementary teachers who would be implementing the instruction in the fall. While the

need for updating the K-5 math program had been talked about in the last few years, this became a priority since students demonstrated deficits and learning loss in this area. The K-5 math program would offer a stronger instructional platform for math instruction and conceptual understanding.

Similarly, a new middle school schedule had been discussed informally by teachers and leaders at Newtown Middle School long before COVID, many of whom had voiced concerns over certain restrictive elements of their schedule. Staff and leaders had been anxious to take a fresh look at a schedule that could allow for stronger academic connections and time to connect with students on social-emotional learning topics. Changes to the schedule moved world language into the cluster as one of the core academic classes to offer students a much stronger foundation in French and Spanish as they transitioned to High School. This “bridge” from the middle level to high school was a priority in the district, ultimately inspiring connections between levels.

Technology and Digital Resources

While new programs and services would continue to refine instructional improvements, the use of technology and digital resources became important themes in the building of our budget. The growing familiarity with devices and digital tools left an indelible impression on educators as an effective means of instructional delivery. Prior to COVID, resources relied primarily on texts with some digital applications to supplement the curriculum. While the remote learning itself was arduous for some learners, digital applications helped facilitate students’ content understanding and skill development, while engaging learners who were either disenfranchised or struggling academically. Programs, such as Seesaw, Screencastify, and IXL for math and language arts, enabled further connections between students and staff outside of the classroom, augmented curriculum, and motivated learners to be independent and self-directed. With the right balance of technology use and appropriate funding in the 2021-22 budget, maintaining assured investments in technology and digital resources would provide significant benefits for students well beyond COVID.

Diversity and Equity

Benefits for our students would also come in the form of an ongoing commitment to create a caring and respectful culture. A belief statement in Newtown’s Strategic Plan identified the importance of deepening our understanding of diversity as “...essential in the global society.” Creating a safe and equitable learning environment for our students was not only a district goal but a priority by the Connecticut State Department of Education. The Newtown Board of Education worked to develop a Diversity & Equity Resolution, and policies around racial harassment and equity were developed and refined. These beliefs and values became the impetus for a new Diversity & Equity Coordinator position. The non-administrative position would work as liaison between the district and families, and work collaboratively with leaders and staff to support students K-12 to resolve incidents of discrimination, harassment, and bullying.

Professional Development

Further, requests in the budget advocated for professional development and training for our staff on topics related to diversity and equity. In November, a full staff development day allowed for teachers to participate in anti-race workshops. These were so well received that additional funding requests were included in the 2021-22 budget so that teachers would gain a deeper understanding and confidence in having sensitive discussions in class, providing advice to students that may feel discriminated against, teaching students to be “upstanders,” and consistently applying the policies and protocols to ensure a safe and respectful culture exists for all students.

Other staff development requests expressed in the budget included training in differentiated instruction, tools and strategies teachers could use to meet the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms, critically important as students would be re-entering school in the fall with a variety of strengths and deficits in academics. Teachers at the K-5 level would be implementing a new math program, and requests for professional development in this area would provide a fundamental understanding of this new program and how this should be delivered consistently across all elementary classrooms.

Final Thoughts

Jack Lew, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury once noted, “The budget is not just a collection of numbers, but an expression of our values and aspirations.” The school budget process in Newtown, which begins in October and extends until the referendum in April, reflects a thoughtful dialogue between and among staff and leaders who want to make a significant difference in the lives of all students. Requests for staffing, technology, support personnel, curriculum, texts and professional development represent genuine needs to continue to elevate the quality of programs and services extended to Newtown students. Although the economic landscape during and following the pandemic remains tenuous, the thoughtful approach we took in developing the 2021-22 will provide lasting investments in our students’ educational futures.

A Walk Through the Budget

This year, the Board of Education requested \$80,682,470 for the 2021-22 budget, just over \$2M more than the approved 2020-21 budget (an increase of 2.58%). The proposed budget includes growth in staff-related expenses due to wage increases, increased benefits costs, and staffing positions added during the current year as well as requested for next year. This area is, by far, the largest contributor to the overall increase.

To offset salary increases, the district is offering an early retirement package to senior teachers that is expected to save an additional \$310,000 next year. In addition, the district now participates in a “Virtual Net Metering” program that is expected to offset energy costs by about \$200,000. Finally, the district is currently pursuing grants to offset expenses associated with Diversity and Equity efforts. These grants were in process at the time this article was written. If successful, the grant-funded portion of Diversity and Equity efforts will be removed from the budget.

The [2021-22 proposed budget](#) provides a detailed accounting of staffing and expected expenses for the district. A more compact [presentation](#) provides a higher-level representation of the same material. What follows goes beyond the numbers, focusing instead on the modifications to staffing, programs, and services since the adoption of the 2020-21 budget and as requested in the proposed 2021-22 budget. The sections below roughly follow the organization provided in the proposed budget, for those of you who wish to cross-reference.

Definitions: To simplify the prose, “approved budget” is used to refer to the 2020-21 budget as adopted on May 6, 2020. The 2021-22 proposed budget, to be voted on in April, is called the “proposed budget.” Also, operational expenses that are funded by other sources, such as grants, are discussed below. In this article, the sum of the grant-funded and budgetary expenses is referred to as “annual operational expenses” while “budgeted operational expenses” refers to expenses called out in the proposed budget and paid for using taxpayer funds.

Elementary and Reed Schools

Educational expenses, including teachers and learning supplies, account for a large portion of the budget for the elementary and Reed schools. The proposed budget includes about 9 additional teachers, roughly 4.7 were added this year and 4.33 more are requested for next year.

Both Head O’Meadow and Reed have added teaching staff this year. Kindergarten classes at Head O’Meadow exceeded class-size guidelines, so an additional kindergarten teacher was added. Reed added a part-time Spanish teacher to provide world language to 5th graders. Also, expenses for two existing world language (Spanish) teachers were transferred from the curriculum account to the elementary schools, adding to the number of teachers but incurring no additional increase in budget. In addition, when the district moved to distance learning, some students experienced difficulties that impacted their learning. To address that problem, the schools added hours to math & reading paraeducators that account for the increase in staffing for 2020-21.

The 2021-22 budget includes 4 additional teachers, based on enrollment projections. Hawley and Sandy Hook would each receive an additional teacher and a new two-teacher cluster would be added in Reed. In addition a part-time world language (Spanish) teacher would also be

added to Reed, finishing the expansion of world language from K-6. An existing paraeducator that was previously funded by a grant was also added to the proposed budget. Also, reading and math intervention programs were further expanded across the elementary schools. The intervention staffing is expected to be funded by federal COVID relief funds and so is not a budgeted operational expense.

Estimating student enrollment all while not knowing the number of students moving into or out of the district is, at best, an art. When a community experiences a pandemic, enrollment projections are even more difficult. During normal years, estimates for classroom enrollments are based on what has happened from grade to grade over the past few years – for example on average, over the last five years, how many more (or fewer) third grade students were there than second graders in the prior school year.

This year 67 students disenrolled from the district, most of whom would have been in K-6. Until September arrives, we will not know (for sure) how many of those students will re-enroll. Because of this disenrollment, our usual method for estimating enrollment will likely not be accurate. Instead, we decided to rely on the 2019 Prowda projections – 2021-22 is year 2 of those projections and evidence demonstrated that the year 1 projections were quite accurate for aggregate school-based populations when the disenrolled students were accounted for.

The housing market is also acting very differently this year. The turnover of single family houses is about 40% more than last year likely spurred by the pandemic, something that was not accounted for in the 2019 Prowda analysis. We do not know how many families are moving into the district (and what schools their children will attend) and, as importantly, how many are moving out (and what schools their children will be leaving). To provide some room in the budget to respond to unexpected enrollment, the budget includes funds for an additional teacher as a potential salary adjustment. This adjustment calls out the most likely placement for the teacher based on the information available in December, but that placement can be changed as needed.

Newtown Middle School

Educational expenses, including teachers and learning supplies, account for a large portion of the budget for the middle school also. Overall, the proposed budget eliminates 3.8 teaching positions. A new math interventionist position has been added to aid students who are struggling as a result of the pandemic. This position is expected to be funded by federal COVID relief funds.

The middle school population has decreased enough to reduce the number of clusters from 7.5 to 6, though both grades would be very close to maximum class-size guidelines. As mentioned in the prior article, the district decided that a new schedule for the middle school would be prudent. An added benefit of the new schedule is that more students may be accommodated within each cluster. By promoting world language (Spanish, French) to a core cluster class^[i], students can be spread across five classrooms instead of four during the cluster class periods, reducing class size from 24 to 19 for both grades. Each cluster will have its own world language teacher, so an additional 3.2 teachers were requested in the proposed budget.

In addition to strengthening the transition of world language from the middle school to the high school, mentioned in the earlier article, the new schedule offers a bridge for students to continue their world language journey from kindergarten through high school. Since world language was originally a unified arts^[ii] course, a new unified arts class will be needed to replace it. Also, the

Family and Consumer Science (FaCS) teacher retired, making room for another unified arts class. The administration is planning to survey 6th and 7th grade students to solicit input into choice of replacement courses.

In tandem with the schedule revision, special education services were reassessed. The administration reviewed co-taught classes available at the high school and decided that the approach would better aid middle school students especially now, given the COVID impact on special education students. In migrating this program to the middle school, a special education teacher is needed, per cluster, to support students. As a result, two special education teachers have been added to the middle school using federal COVID relief funds. If the expanded program works as expected, these teachers will eventually be added to the budget.

Newtown High School

There are three primary components that impact the high school expenses: 1) breadth of programming to ensure that every student is prepared for life after graduation, 2) student population, and 3) educational mandates, of which there are three in progress. The changes in the budget this year are driven mostly by the latter two components, netting a proposed reduction of 2.3 teachers.

The first mandate requires the completion of a 1 credit course for a “mastery-based class” prior to graduation and applies to the 2021 graduating class. The high school fulfilled this requirement by offering a “Capstone Project,” similar to what many universities have done for their graduates to demonstrate subject mastery. Students, using the tools and skills they have learned throughout their years in Newtown schools, select a topic that they are enthusiastic about or simply want to delve deeper into. All students, regardless of level, must finish a Capstone Project. This year, both juniors and seniors are working on Capstone Projects. Juniors are investigating project areas and developing proposals and seniors are implementing and completing the projects, presenting them to their class at the end of the required Capstone course. About 30% of teachers are involved, guiding and encouraging students during the process.

The second mandate affects physical education and health, and applies to the 2023 graduating class. The mandate increases the number of required graduation credits from 1.5 for both health and physical education to 1 credit for health and 1 credit for physical education. At this time, the high school has to manage both sets of classes, the original 1.5 credit program for juniors and seniors and the 2.0 program for freshmen and sophomores.

The third mandate shifts from a math and science program emphasis to a STEM (Science, Math, Engineering, and Math) emphasis, and also applies to the class of 2023. The mandate increases the total required graduation credits from 6 to 9 in this area. Electives that can be used to meet the added requirements are designated as a “STEM Elective.” For example, students can fulfill the credit requirement with computer science courses, architecture, or computer music (both a STEM and a Humanities elective). It is not yet clear if/how this will impact future staffing needs.

Special Education

The budget for Special Education (SPED) is directly related to the number of students in need of special education services and the costs of those services. The bulk of the increases are for in-district student education. From June 1, 2020 to Feb 22, 2021, in-district SPED enrollment went from 623 to 653 students, not including 20 SPED students who dis-enrolled for the year and are

expected to join back. Including these students in the total count, 673 in-district SPED students are expected to enroll next year - netting an effective gain of 50 students from Jun 2020 to Sep 1, 2021. Among these 50, 38 SPED students moved into the district this year. The district also saw an increase in the number of internal referrals for SPED evaluations. Because of these increased caseloads, just over five staff positions were added this year, though one is funded by federal relief funds.

The remaining increase of staff, just over half a teacher, is accounted for in Transition Services. This program, open to students from other districts[iii], provides 18-22 year-old students added support to become contributing members of the community by gaining work experience at local businesses, something that was unfortunately limited during this year because of COVID.

Pupil Personnel

The Pupil Personnel budget consists of guidance and school counselors who guide the academic/career and social emotional well-being of all students. It also includes the nursing staff who promote and protect the health of all students.

A middle school guidance position has been phased out in response to changes in student population. Also, grants for three existing social workers ended, though another grant funding source was identified for one of the three, so the proposed budget shows 2 additional counselors.

The proposed budget maintains the increase to 8 hour days for nurses that was initiated as part of the district's COVID operations. This year, nurses needed to be on hand and prepared to ensure that students were healthy enough to be in school and to manage the added surveillance required during the pandemic. (Currently, many nurses are working well more than 8 hours a day, helping with contact tracing and administrative tasks.) However even before the pandemic, nurses were often at schools whenever students were in school or in need of medical oversight. Students are in classes for 6.5 hours each day and in the buildings even longer because of staggered arrival and departure times. Nurses also assist with medical issues that may arise on buses. Therefore, nurses have habitually been present for well over 7 hours a day. The budget increase acknowledges their efforts.

Curriculum

The budget for curriculum includes administrators and staff who oversee the implementation of the curriculum and classroom services. It also includes expenses for staff and curriculum development along with cross-school educational resources, including assessment tools, online educational platforms, and textbooks.

The proposed budget shows increases in online educational platforms and multimedia educational resources (textbooks integrated with online tools) though, as mentioned in the article above, the shift to a digitally-enhanced learning model was well underway. As learning went to full distance in March, to hybrid in September and to full in-person as the year progressed, both teachers and students became familiar with online tools that helped facilitate connection and learning. Additional online education platforms and related software are included throughout the budget, e.g., in technology, special education, and throughout the schools. The added cost for online content is also seen in the textbooks section, where multimedia activities are an integral part of the K-5 Mathematics Resource. The district has been piloting the program over the last few years, with good results. The combination of

textbook and interactive, online activities engage the students and is expected to further improve academic performance across all K-5 grades and classrooms.

Technology

The technology budget includes expenses needed for providing Chromebooks to students and classroom staff, specialized technology for labs, devices for administration and operations, and the infrastructure needed to tie everything together. It also provides user-support services to students/families and staff.

A part-time software specialist position was added this year. This new position was in response to the increase in workload caused, in part, by the one-to-one device to student program. The staff has more devices to maintain and fix, and more users to support including family members who may be unable to help their children use the devices at home. In addition the breadth and number of software packages used by district students and staff is expanding as the district shifts to digitally-enhanced learning. The proposed budget also includes expenses associated with updating the world language and graphics labs at the high school.

The approved budget does not reflect the annual operational expenses approved by the Legislative Council. The budget presented to the Council last year included \$525,000 for technology equipment. In April, the Council voted to offset those costs with Town funds, reducing the amount listed in the budgeted operational expenses to \$410,000. The Town then provided the district with the \$115,000 using the Capital Non-Recurring Account, the Town's "savings account" for selected capital projects. So while the annual operational expenses remained the same, the 2020-21 budgeted operational expenses were reduced.

Going forward, this is the first budget that fully reflects a one-to-one device to student program. There is a Chromebook now available to every student in K-8. Also, every teacher and paraeducator who assists with lessons has access to their own Chromebooks as well. From this year forward, no further grade-level expansion of student devices will be needed though devices will need to be replaced when broken or obsolete. And, some additional devices may be needed for new students over time. From 2021-22 onward, Newtown High School freshmen will be provided with a new device to use throughout their time at the high school. In four years, every high-school student will be assigned a personal device. The district will continue to add other, non-educational equipment including administrative devices, specialized lab technology, and infrastructure equipment as needed.

General Support Services

The general services budget includes expenses related to the overall operation of the district, including three school-wide administrators, the business office, security, and salary adjustments that may be needed as the 2021-22 year progresses.

To guide and implement the district's diversity and equity efforts, a new Diversity Compliance Coordinator is requested for the central office staff. Funds needed to engage the services of an outside organization experienced with such efforts are also included in the proposed budget. As mentioned in the preceding article, the district has committed attention, effort, and time to ensure that both the educational and working culture of the district are welcoming to all students and staff. At this time, the district is actively pursuing potential grant funding to offset these expenses. If successful, these costs will be removed from the budgeted operational expenses.

Plant Operations and Maintenance

The Plant Operations and Maintenance budget provides for a safe, clean, and secure learning/working environment. It includes maintenance and custodial and plant operations.

Like technology above, the proposed budget does not tell the complete story. The budget presented to the Council last year included \$335,000 for "Building & Site Maint. Projects." In April, the Council voted to offset those costs with Town funds, reducing the amount listed in the budgeted operational expenses to \$0. The Town then provided the district with \$335,000 using the Capital Non-Recurring Account. So while the annual operational expenses remained the same, the budgeted operational expenses for "Building & Site Maint. Projects" were eliminated.

Next Steps

The creation and approval of the final Board of Education Budget is a multi-step process, including review and recommendation by the Board of Finance, consideration and approval by the Legislative Council, adoption by Newtown voters, and finally revision of the budget by the Board of Education to reconcile any reductions in funding. As of the time of writing this article, the Board of Finance step has just been completed and the budget is heading to the Legislative Council.

The Board of Finance has reduced the overall budget by \$140,000. In addition, the board has recommended that existing Town funds be used to defray the costs associated with technology equipment by \$29,941, and to fully fund the building & site maintenance projects, similar to what was done this year. If accepted by the Legislative Council, this will mean that \$349,491 remains part of the annual operational expenses, but is removed from the budgeted operational expenses. With these changes, the increase for the proposed budget drops to just under 2.0%.

By the time you read this, the Legislative Council should be well into their budget deliberations in preparation for presenting it to the voters on Tuesday, April 27, 2021.

[i] Currently core cluster classes include ELA, social studies, math, and science.

[ii] Unified arts are classes from non-core disciplines including art, music, physical education, health, technology education, and computer integration. This year, they also include world language and consumer sciences. These classes are taught every second or third day during the unified arts periods.

[iii] Out-of-district students pay tuition relative to the costs of the program.