

Board of Education
Communications Sub-Committee
April 5th, 2021
Virtual Meeting 1:30 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 1:34 PM

2. Public Participation

None

3. New Business

- Approve Minutes of March 1st and March 10th Meeting
*Motion made by Ms. Zukowski, 2nd Mr. Cruson
Approved Unanimously*
- Discuss Parent Participation newsletter
Mr. Cruson suggested that the committee aim for a July release.

Dr. Rodrigue warned that sending the newsletter during the summer would likely result in lower readership.

Ms. Zukowski suggested holding the newsletter until August and sending just before school starts back up.

Dr. Rodrigue reviewed the different ways that parents participate in the schools, including Field Days, Holiday Fairs, Teacher Appreciation and Fundraising for various equipment. She also brought up the way parents drove the solution to the lack of staffing during the pandemic.

Ms. Zukowski suggested that the committee write articles on parent participation in PEAC, PTAs, In School Activities and Extra Curricular Activities.

4. Public Participation

None

5. Adjournment

Motion made by Mr. Cruson, 2nd Ms. Zukowski. Approved Unanimously. Adjourned at 2:37 PM

Respectfully submitted:

Daniel Cruson Jr.
Chair

A Walk Through the Budget

Welcome to the first annual “Walk Through the Budget,” where we try to take a 193 page document and sift it down to a rather long article. Overall, the BoE budget is requesting just over \$2M more than last year (an increase of 2.58%). We will do our best to ensure the major elements that are unique to this budget are called out in as straightforward a manner as possible. This article is based on the budget as approved by the Board of Education on February 2, 2021. The final budget will include subsequent review and revisions by the Board of Finance and the Legislative Council. All comparisons of staff and expenses use the information provided in the originally adopted 2020-21 budget.

The budget document, available at: [2021-2022 BoE Recommended Budget](#), begins with an introduction of our strategic plan, district priorities, and other information, summarized in the above articles. [DJZ: I’m thinking that this is what Dr. Rodrigue will be covering.] What follows is a discussion for each of the core areas of district operations that includes significant changes and/or cost drivers that underlie the financial needs presented. This discussion does not include contract-related increases since they transcend a single budget year.

The district is offering an early retirement package to senior teachers, expected to save several hundreds of thousands of dollars. This savings will help offset salaries for next year’s requested teachers. In addition, the district now participates in a “Virtual Net Metering” program across 6 schools, that is anticipated to offset energy costs by about \$200,000. [DJZ: Is the number correct?] Both offsets are included in the budget. Finally, the district is actively pursuing grants to offset expenses associated with Diversity and Equity efforts. These grants were in process at the time this article was written.

Elementary and Reed Schools, pages 36-84.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: increase \$750,921 (+4.8%)

The increase for both the elementary schools and Reed are primarily due to added staff. Staff were added during the 2020-21 school year because of pandemic-related student support, additional teachers, and administrative shifts in the budget. In toto, about 4.7(FTE) teachers were added since the start of the 2020-21 school year. Additional teachers have been added in the 2021-22 school year as a result of student enrollment projections.

When the district moved to distance learning, some students experienced difficulties that impacted their learning. To address that problem, elementary schools added instructional paraeducators, who work closely with struggling students, and expanded the math and reading intervention programs for those needing more focused help. This added assistance is being carried forward for the 2021-22 school year. The latter is funded through federal COVID relief funds and is not included in the 2021-22 budget.

Both Head O’Meadow (HOM) and Reed added teaching staff both. The HOM kindergarten classes exceeded class-size guidelines, so an additional kindergarten teacher was added. Reed added an additional 0.67(FTE) teacher to address science?????. [DJZ: Note that the 2020-21 budget “includes classroom teachers, 21st century skills teacher and for 20-21 a Spanish teacher” in the original 28 classroom teachers.”] Also administratively, the expenses for two world language (Spanish) teachers

were transferred from the Curriculum section of the budget to the elementary schools. This transfer from one account to another did not impact the overall budget. Likewise, there was a re-balancing of physical education teachers among the elementary and intermediate schools, again incurring no additional increase in budget.

The enrollment projects for the 2021-22 school year indicated that an additional 4(FTE) teachers were needed to meet class-size guidelines, 2 new teachers across the four elementary schools and 2 for Reed. In addition a 1/3(FTE) world language (Spanish) teacher was also added to Reed intermediate school.

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 that art becomes quite abstract. 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 dis-enrolled 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 dis-enrollment, 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 showed that the year 1 projections were quite accurate for aggregate school-based populations when the dis-enrolled 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, something that was not accounted for in the 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 (on page 155). This adjustment calls out the most likely placement for the teacher based on the information we had at hand in December, but that placement can be changed as needed.

Newtown Middle School, pages 85-100.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: decrease \$266,182 (-5.1%)

The middle school budget was reduced by 1.5 clusters to 6 clusters because of a drop in enrollment. However some other teachers were added because of a change in schedule that enhanced the world language (Spanish, French) program. In addition two special education teachers have been added, using federal COVID relief funds, to better address learning for some special education students. Because a federal grant is used, these teachers are not included in the budget. If the expanded program works as expected, then these teachers eventually be added to the budget.

To date, some students entering middle school in need of reading assistance are unable to attend foreign language classes because of scheduling conflicts. Even after some no longer

needed reading assistance, they would not be able to join classes already in session. The following year, these students would still not be able to take a language and so every student who started middle school needing reading intervention, no matter for how long, would move up to high school with no 7th or 8th grade language.

To address this problem, a new middle school schedule that promotes world language to “core curriculum” status (as many school districts have already done) has been developed. Next year, all students, regardless of need for interventions, will now be able to take world language because 3 extra teachers (3.2 FTE) would be available to teach 5 classes of world language each day. This change caused a ripple effect since world language was once a unified art¹ [DJZ: see footnote] course that was taught a few times each week. When it moved to be a core curriculum course, it opened up a slot that will be filled with another elective, needing another teacher. Also, the Family and Consumer Science (FaCS) teacher is retiring, opening up another slot. So, two teachers are included in the budget for back-filling two unified arts slots.

Newtown High School, pages 101-127.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: increase \$94,903 (+0.1%)

The Newtown High School student population is falling. The budget reduces the number of teachers by roughly the same amount. The 0.1% increase is primarily caused by contracted salary raises.

Special Education, pages 128-137.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: increase \$293,866 (+2.5%)

[DJZ: There is a budget increase for 2021-22 from the perspective of the 2020-21 adopted budget, caused by an increase of over 4FTE that we added this year. I don't have enough information to write about motivations/goals.]

Pupil Personnel, pages 138-144.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: increase \$355,735 (+8.7%)

[DJZ: The Summary presented to the BoF says 3 social workers came off grants, but I only see 2. I do see the NMS guidance counselor who departed, that mitigates the addition. Bottom line, I'm not sure what to say here.]

This budget maintains the increase to 8 hour days for nurses that was initiated as part of the district's COVID operations. At the time, nurses needed to be on hand and prepared to ensure that students were healthy enough to be in school. However, even before the pandemic, nurses were often at schools well beyond their 7-hour day. They felt it important to be present for

1 People may not know what a unified art course is, so we can add a description here.

medically-fragile students from the time they set foot in the school and until the time they were safely home?????. [DJZ: If possible, it would be better to use numbers, like when the first student arrives to when the last student leaves for all levels of schools. Also, are nurses part of the response team if a student gets ill while on the bus?]

Curriculum, pages 145-148.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: increase \$15,720 (+1.4%)

The increased expenses for Curriculum is, in part, connected to the pandemic – though not in the obvious way; The pandemic accelerated the adoption of a digitally-enhanced learning model. To improve distance education, teachers needed something that could engage students across the virtual void. The solution that many found was online educational platforms, software that could provide engaging activities as part of the learning experience. While the software had been used in pockets throughout the district prior to the pandemic, it's use was not uniform across grades or even among classes within grades.

As learning went to full distance in March, to hybrid in September and to full in-person as the year progressed, teachers and students both became familiar with online tools that helped facilitate both connection and learning. Our earlier [July 2020](#) and [February 2021](#) newsletters capture snapshots of these experiences in the “A Closer Look” articles. Looking through the list of contracted services on page 147 of the 2021-22 budget, one sees the names mentioned by the teachers in those articles. Other education platforms and related software are included throughout the budget, e.g., in technology, special education, and schools.

The added cost for online content is also seen in the Textbooks section, where multi-media activities are an integral part of the K-5 Mathematics Resource. The combination of textbook and interactive, online activities engage the students and is expected to further improve academic performance.

Technology, pages 148-151.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: increase \$26,174 (+1.7%)

As shown in the 2021-22 budget, the main cost driver is for a 0.6(FTE) software specialist position. This position was added in response to the increase, both in number and function/capability, of software packages used by district students and personnel.

What is not shown in the budget is the actual expenses incurred by the district for the 2020-21 school year. The 2020-21 budget presented to the Legislative Council last year, as recommended by the Board of Finance, included \$525,000 for technology equipment. In April, the Legislative Council voted to offset the costs, using money available from a FEMA reimbursement, reducing the amount listed in the budget to \$410,000. The Town then provided the district with the addition \$115,000 needed to make up the difference. So while the budget – using the budgeted

\$410,000 – shows a 1.7% increase, the overall operational budget is reduced by about over 5%, when accounting for the operational expenses covered via the FEMA funds.

This is the first budget that fully reflects a sustaining educational device model. There is a Chromebook now available to every student in K-8. Also, every teacher and paraeducator who assists with lessons also has access to their own Chromebooks. 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. For Newtown High School, entering freshmen are provided with a new device to use throughout their time at the high school. The district will continue to add other, non-educational equipment including administrative devices, specialized lab technology, and infrastructure equipment.

General Support Services, pages 152-157.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: increase \$235,070 (+8.2%)

[DJZ: Dr. Rodrigue. I know that this is really close to your heart. Please do make any changes, including total replacement, as you see fit.] The district's diversity and equity efforts, including a Diversity Compliance Coordinator and the use of an outside organization to provide its knowledge and experience to staff and processes, are the primary cost drivers for this chapter. 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. There is still much work to be done, including improving relationships with families and staff of color and better teaching students about the benefits of inclusion within the halls of our schools and the contributions of all Americans to our history, science, arts, and more. At this time, the district is actively pursuing potential grant funding to offset these expenses.

(The salary for the added teacher, if needed, mentioned in Elementary and Reed Schools accounts for over a quarter of the the increase on funds.)

Plant Operations and Maintenance, pages 160-170.

Change from 2020-21 budget to 2021-22 budget: increase \$220,459 (+2.9%)

Based on the budget document, the bulk of the increase for Plant Operations and Maintenance appears to be "Building & Site Maint. Projects." However like technology above, this does not tell the complete story. As was done for technology, the Legislative Council voted for the Town to provide the district with money to pay for maintenance projects from the FEMA reimbursement, removing the \$335,000 included in the 2020-21 budget recommended by the Board of Finance. So, while the budget – using the zeroed-out maintenance project line – shows a 2.9% increase, the overall operational budget is actually reduced by about 1%, when accounting for the operational expenses covered via the FEMA funds.

Conclusion

The Board of Education Budget is the beginning of a process for preparing Town and Board of Education budget requests to the voters in April. The process includes review and recommendation by the Board of Finance followed by consideration and adoption by Legislative Council. Each board brings its own perspective that it uses to decide what, if anything, should be removed or added. In addition, as was done last year, the Legislative Council may find innovative ways to alternatively fund portions of district and town programs. If, like last year, the budget provided for taxpayer approval is reduced by the latter, the funds available for district and/or town operations will remain available to them, ensuring that the planned programs and projects continue. As for the remaining budget, that is for the voters to decide.