

During the Committee's meeting on February 4th, J. McCormack stated that she hadn't announced at this meeting that G. Groff was attending via telephone, that she was at home in Merrimack and no one was in the room with her.

Merrimack School District Budget Committee
Minutes

January 14, 2025

Present: K. Bernier, M. Berry, D. Coakley, G. Groff, J. McCormack, C. Mower, M. Murphy, R. Paepke, S. Rand, A. Santoriello, B. Trant and School Board Liaison K. Martin

Absent: L. French

Also Present: Chief Educational Officer Bill Olsen, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Amy Doyle, Assistant Superintendent for Business Matt Shevenell and various department heads

J. McCormack called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance. J. McCormack noted that there was a large audience in attendance. She asked everyone present to be respectful of others.

Public Participation

J. McCormack opened Public Participation by saying the Committee values comments from the public but asked that those who do speak to keep their comments brief.

Sheri Quirion (Pondview Drive) said she was thrilled with recent changes in the services offered by the District. She told the Committee that she was upset about the plan to centralize the District pre-school program at MES but she understood the need to cut costs and stated that data shows that student scores are rising.

Olivia Grobecker (3rd grader) said she likes Mystery Science and Wit & Wisdom. She thinks the schools should keep them.

Lori Peters (School Board Chair) said she wanted to provide answers to questions asked at the last Budget Committee meeting. She gave a brief explanation of the default budget. She said the state average cost per pupil is \$21,545 and Merrimack's cost per pupil is \$21,044. She shared a chart comparing the number of building administrators in area communities to Merrimack and said that the curriculum offered by the Merrimack School District was decided by a curriculum committee to align with the state standards and is approved by the School Board. She said the improvement in student scores over the last year is significant and noted that 74% of the proposed budget was the result of contractual obligations.

Merrimack TV announced that an overflow room with a live feed had been set up since there were so many people standing in the room.

Melissa Blasak (Twin Bridge Road) said that the national per pupil cost was \$14,000 per pupil and that inflation is a serious issue.

Marissa Halvatzes (Seaverns Bridge Road) said we need to continue to move our schools forward. She said the schools are improving, student scores are going up and a good school system adds to housing values.

Heather Robitaille (Springfield Circle) said we are all concerned about taxes but taxes are not a simple issue. She said the state Supreme Court has ruled on how education should be funded but that ruling is being ignored. She said the state legislature should act. She also said she believed in our schools as well as our staff and thanked all those who came to the meeting.

Meghan Delyani (Fox Meadow Road) said she disagreed with suggestions that the District pause implementing new programs. She said recent assessment scores show improvement and the District needs consistent funding and resources to provide a fair and equitable education for all Merrimack students. She said she thought there were more people interested in improving the schools rather than slashing the budget.

Barbara McCormick (Island Drive) said the budget is unrealistic compared to the current student population. She said she has heard that some classes have only 12 students.

Sarah Leland (Naticook Road) said that there are a lot of unfilled positions in our school which she felt was negatively impacting the children's education. She said schools are the foundation of our future.

J. McCormack thanked all the speakers.

School Board Budget Recommendation

J. McCormack told the Committee that the only change the School Board has recommended to the Administration's proposed budget is to cut \$27,073 from the High School/Police Detail line. She said the School Board is recommending a bottom line of \$96,823,198.

Department Budget Reviews

James Mastricola Upper Elementary

Principal Dr. Nicole Rheault and Assistant Principal Meaghan Fowler
Committee Liaisons – M. Murphy, A. Santoriello and B. Trant

M. Murphy reported that last year a new Science program was implemented which costs \$42 per student per year for workbooks and supplies. She said a new Reading program (Wit & Wisdom) was implemented which has annual costs per student of \$5.41. She told the Committee there is a \$2,000 increase in the Co-Curricular line to make up for cutting the French program last year. She said the increase will provide several new activities for the students and noted that JMUES has partnered with the high school by providing several Extended Learning Opportunities for high school students who help with the Co-Curricular activities. M. Murphy said the Math Interventionist works with staff and students in both grades and receives salary and benefits based on the MTA contract. She reported that I-Ready, the assessment tool the District uses, has already shown that Math scores have gone up. In addition, she said JMUES has decided not to

continue replacing rectangular cafeteria tables with round tables, but the Art program has requested art racks to better store supplies.

Dr. Rheault thanked the liaisons for meeting with them and asked if any Budget Committee member had any questions.

B. Trant asked for some clarification about the difference between the Title I teacher and the Math Interventionist. Dr. Rheault explained that there is a long list of students waiting to qualify for Title I services and the Interventionist is working with these students as well as with staff in both grades. She said the interventionist spends 20% of her time researching what is needed to help the students improve and 80% of her time working directly with students.

J. McCormack said she was personally aware of the benefit of the Math Interventionist and the second computer teacher and asked about teaching typing.

Dr. Rheault said that that students regularly practice typing but she would talk to staff about ways to improve typing skills.

Elementary Schools

MES – Principal Michelle Romein and Assistant Principal Kathleen Ortega

RFS – Principal Bonnie Painchaud and Assistant Principal Amy Gentile

TFS – Principal Julie DeLuca and Assistant Principal Brooke Ross

Committee Liaisons: D. Coakley, L. French, S. Rand, and A. Santoriello

D. Coakley reported that library costs that were part of the Technology Department budget, are now split amongst the individual school budgets. He noted that M. Shevenell is working on determining the actual expenditures for the prior year per school.

D. Coakley said what used to be called S.L.P. is now called Co-Curricular Activities and there are 10 Co-Curricular activities or clubs offered each semester. He said no additional staff is needed to oversee the various clubs and each activity facilitator receives a \$250 stipend. He indicated the budget line also includes funds for supplies needed for the various activities and that last year MES spent \$8,000, RFS spent \$4,000 and TFS spent \$5,000 in this line. He told the Committee that another budget line the liaisons discussed was police details. He said the District pays the police a minimum of 4 hours per event and that the Parent/Faculty Associations used to cover the police cost but Covid impacted PFAs and they are having difficulty in rebounding. He indicated that MES has 3 events, RFS has 4 events and TFS has 4 events that request a police detail. D. Coakley explained that the classroom supply lines are estimated using the District per pupil supply cost but there is a large increase in the paper supply line because paper has more than doubled in cost. He mentioned that there was discussion about whether the Community Relations line should be called something else and the liaisons noted that many of the activities now in this budget line used to be sponsored by the PFAs.

D. Coakley said there was a question about whether SEL was mandated by the state. Principal DeLuca told the liaison team she would research and get back to the Committee.

D. Coakley reported that some of the increase in staffing at the elementary schools was directly related to I.E.P. requirements, that each school has added a counselor and there is now an additional instructional aide in each kindergarten class.

D. Coakley said he also asked:

- What staff wanted that was not in the budget. Answer: a climbing wall.
- If there were no constraints, what else would be in the budget. Answer: more staff.
- How the default budget has affected the students. Answer: no impact on the students.
- How the default budget has affected the staff. Answer: possibly staff feels unappreciated.

D. Coakley said there was a request to define “improvement” and he said he would discuss any open questions the liaison team had with the Administrative team. Then he thanked the elementary principals and assistant principals and led a standing ovation for them.

No one had any questions or comments.

Merrimack Middle School

Principal Chrigus Boezemen & Assistant Principal Kathleen Hoppa

Committee Liaisons: R. Paepke, M. Berry, K. Bernier and B. Trant

R. Paepke reported that the liaison team reviewed the middle school budget page by page, line by line. She said the I-Ready diagnostic program is being used in both 7th and 8th grades. She said Academic Assistance is a program offered year round to help students after school. She indicated that a new item in the budget is a Civil War presentation. She said staff feels the presentation is important enough that funds should be available in the budget if the PFA can't fund it. R. Paepke said there is an increase in the Health supplies budget line for general hygiene items and water. She explained that the school nurse has not been able to secure as many donations as in the past. She said math and science supply lines show an increase for consumables in both grades. She said since foreign language was cut from the upper elementary schools, the middle school now offers French and Spanish as part of unified arts in both 7th and 8th grade. Three sets of texts, which will be reusable, were purchased.

R. Paepke reported that the liaison team discovered that \$1,000 for supplies for the cheer/spirit team had been inadvertently left out of the budget proposal. She told the Committee the middle school is requesting three new sports teams by request of students and parents: a second boys soccer team and both a boys and a girls lacrosse team. The budget for these teams includes a stipend for the coach and all equipment needed to support these teams. She also said that the middle school is considering adding a unified sports team in the future.

R. Paepke told the Committee that the middle school has added an Administrative Dean of Students and noted other increases in the budget include new texts for the new Sci-Ed curriculum, adding Wit & Wisdom to the 8th grade and purchasing additional Health class supplies which include alcohol eye goggles and new CPR manikins. She said the replacement lines for furniture, music equipment and science equipment include an additional 5% for potential inflation.

No one had any questions or comments.

Merrimack High School

Principal Stephen Claire, Vice Principals Jill Hanlon & Richard Zampieri

Committee Liaison: M. Murphy, M. Berry, C. Mower, and R. Paepke

M. Murphy reported that there were five areas that drove the 8% increase in the budget:

1. Athletic equipment – football and lacrosse helmets and pads plus blue football uniforms.
2. Home Game Management – NHIAA has increased the mileage fees and pay rates for officials and other personnel who work at home games. This line also included police details.
3. New Civic Textbooks – these texts are for the new state mandated Civics exam requirement for graduation and for a new Civics elective course.
4. Athletic Transportation Costs – this account includes transportation, wait time and mileage fees for all away contests and scrimmages plus potential play-off contests
5. Career Technical Education Transportation (CTE) Costs – the increase is due to rising bus fees set by STA.

M. Murphy reminded the Committee that the School Board has recommended a decrease in the police detail line for athletic contests which she said the High School administrative staff support.

M. Murphy said other things that were discussed at the liaison team meeting were funding for a point of sale system for the school store which would allow for better accounting. She indicated that the budget testing lines will now include PSATs for 9th and 10th grade. She said these are the only progress monitoring tools for these grades.

M. Murphy said the cost for the Merrimack Mentors program includes transportation and supplies for the 60+ students who participate. She said the high school has an Adult Ed Diploma program which just had a graduation ceremony and is planning another in February. She said the Graduation Pathways Program and Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) Program had started with \$1,500 seed money which is now gone. She said there are about 50 students in these programs and about 75 ELO opportunities. She said the Academic Interventionalist position was filled by an existing staff member and the position is in the District-Wide budget, not the high school budget.

Principal LeClaire said that the main Power School line is in the Technology budget, and the line in the high school budget for Power School is for add-on programs for counseling scheduling, parent-teacher conference scheduling, the visitor management program and others.

Principal LeClaire explained that a few years ago, due to national incidences of violence in schools, the staff requested and received funds for additional police presence at athletic events. He said there have been no drastic incidents at athletic events so he is comfortable with reducing police presence. However, he said staff does monitor social media and there is ability to request an additional police detail if the need arises. He further explained that, except for football, costs

for all athletic uniform replacement are paid by “gate sales.” He said that all uniforms are replaced every 4 – 5 years.

Principal LeClair said there is a \$2,000 line in the budget for college field trips. He explained that they take students to UNH, SNHU, NHTI and the Portsmouth Naval Yard. He said M. Murphy has suggested that the high school expand this program.

Vice Principal Hanlon explained that the funds from the dissolved Gifted and Talented Program were added to the Co-Curricular line and are being used to support supplies and costs of various school clubs.

M. Murphy also said there sometimes are membership costs or dues associated with facilities rental fees.

C. Mower thanked the principals and their assistants for coming and said he thought that much of what they had had to do was defend their budget proposals. He said he thought the money that is spent by the District goes into our community and the educational development of our children.

J. McCormack asked about the new Civics texts. Principal LeClair said the texts are for the new Civics exam requirement that is now required by the state.

There were no other comments.

District Wide

Chief Educational Officer Bill Olsen, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Amy Doyle and Assistant Superintendent for Business Matt Shevenell

Committee Liaisons: J. McCormack, K. Bernier, M. Murphy and R. Paepke

J. McCormack reported that the liaisons focused on learning about the various areas in the District-Wide budget. She said they discussed implementing assessments, curriculum development, updating policies, literacy improvement efforts, data for progress monitoring consistency across schools and oversight of the Special Education program. She said that there are two professional development lines in the budget. One of them is for training required in the teacher contract and the other is for training on the new curriculum materials. She also said that teachers seem to be staying in Merrimack now that the new contracts have passed but there are still several unfilled para-professional and custodial positions which have been contracted out. She told the Committee there is a need for a dedicated administrative 504 coordinator to improve 504 service delivery. She said there is a 10% increase in the cost of medical benefits for next year which added \$1.2 million dollars to the budget and to the default budget. She said the liaisons discussed grants and state aid. J. McCormack said she had provided a handout to the members on state adequacy aid. She said that M. Shevenell had explained the \$1.2 million dollars of federal aid is listed as both income and an expenditure so it has no tax impact.

J. McCormack said she had specifically asked about the grant for a new security system that last year the administrators had said they were going to apply for. She reported that the District was awarded the grant and has used the funds for security updates.

J. McCormack said there is a new dean of students at MMS which resulted in an increase in the MMS salary lines. She also said the Committee questioned the increase in legal fees and was told that there were legal matters over the last few years and the Administration has increased this line accordingly. She said the liaison team asked why there is an increase in the ESL salary lines even though the ELL (English Language Learners) aid has not increased. The team was told the ELL aid amount is determined by the student population at the end of the prior school year. She reported that this fall, the District had a large increase in ESL students.

J. McCormack explained that Aims Plus is a progress monitoring tool and that I-Ready is a dyslexia screening tool. Both are used to comply with state mandated student assessments.

M. Murphy reported that the liaison team had asked if the staff stipend for committee work will continue to remain level funded and was told the District has a large number of staff who are willing to help on these committees. M. Murphy said that there is a 5% increase in the transportation lines to cover the cost of transporting students to summer programs. She said there is an increase in the number of students invited to attend the summer programs in order to close academic gaps and the District provided transportation.

M. Murphy explained that the funding in the health program lines will be used to vet materials for new K – 6 health courses and a curriculum to meet the new health graduation requirements. M. Murphy also explained that the line for Tech Assistants in the District-Wide budget covers the salaries of the Tech Assistants in each school who work to support the District Technology network, programs, equipment, staff and student 1:1 tablets.

K. Bernier reported that the various unfilled para-professional and custodial positions have been contracted out so there are people doing these jobs in the District. K. Bernier said there had also been a question about the free and reduced lunch program. She said there has not been an increase in students participating in this program but there may be an increase in families that qualify and have not applied. She suggested the District might need to find ways to reach out to people who qualify for the program.

Discussion included:

- When a new student moves to town, the District requires them to provide records from the prior schools they attended and will comply with any I.E.P.s shown in those records; however, the District often does a new assessment as well.
- There are several substitute lines in the budget to indicate the reason the substitute was needed: illness, personal days, professional development as well as to separate teachers and support staff. Maybe this is a section that can be revised for clarity. M. Shevenell suggested there might be an additional \$375 that could be cut from one of these lines.
- Department Head and Curriculum Coordinator stipends are not in the contract. They were recently increased.
- Federal Funds (I.D.E.A, Titles I – IV, etc.) are shown as both a revenue and an expenditure to comply with the accounting requirements of “Gross Budgeting.”

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A. Santoriello said last year \$100,000 had been spent to buy new texts to support a new curriculum. He said he considered this a one-time expenditure which should have been removed from the proposed default budget.

M. Shevenell said texts are a normal operating expenditure and normal operating expenditures are included in the default budget.

C. Mower asked for a Point Of Order. He said the Budget Committee should not be talking about the default budget because it has no legislative authority over the default budget. He said the default budget is approved by the School Board and the Budget Committee cannot change it.

Discussion continued on the District-Wide Budget:

- What is the 10% rule?
- The Committee needs an explanation of how the surplus is handled.
- Perhaps there should be a note in the District-Wide description explaining that salaries for needed para-professional positions need to remain in the para-professional lines to comply with the MESSA contract even though the positions are contracted out.
- “Advise and confer” staff are building level Administrative staff.

C. Mower left the meeting during the continued discussion.

B. Olson said that a lot of time and work had been put into reviewing the budget by the Committee and the staff and he thanked everyone for their efforts.

Work Session

J. McCormack said that there would not be a separate work session at this meeting and asked the members to think about what budget components they wanted to discuss at the work session on February 4th.

Next Meeting

J. McCormack announced the next meeting would be on January 28th at 7 PM.

K. Bernier made a MOTION to start the meeting at 6 PM. Second: R. Paepke.

A roll call vote was held. MOTION PASSED: 10 – 0 – 1. (K. Martin abstained)

J. McCormack said the next meeting would be Tuesday, January 28th, held in the Matthew Thornton Room at Town Hall and starting at 6 PM.

Public Participation

Heather Robitaille (Springfield Circle) thanked all the Budget Committee members as well as all the school staff who worked on the proposed budget and who work to meet the needs of all our children.

Donna Larue (Pondview Drive) thanked the Committee for scrutinizing the budget. She said she appreciated all the things that school staff members have done.

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Lori Peters, (School Board Chair) said that the various stipends are negotiated; they just don't appear in the contract. She said it was clear they needed to be increased and they were. She also said the Federal government was supposed to pay 40% of the Special Education costs, but they only pay 10%. She also said that default budget information is sent to the auditors and DRA.

Barbara McCormick (Island Drive) said the senior citizen/elderly tax exemption is ridiculous and Merrimack taxes are too high.

Committee Comments

There were none.

M. Murphy made a MOTION to adjourn. Second: R. Paepke.

J. McCormack declared the meeting adjourned at 10:10 PM.