

# Merrimack School District Budget Committee

Minutes  
January 26, 2010

Present: T. Beard, M. Beck, J. Burk, B. Cummings, S. Heinrich, C. Lang, M. Publicover, C. Ortega, A. Schneider, A. Sylvia, C. Underhill and School Board Liaison J. Thornton

Excused: R. Buckley

Also Present: Superintendent M. Chiafery, Assistant Superintendent Dr. M. McLaughlin, School Business Administrator M. Shevenell and various department heads

S. Heinrich called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM. He led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

## **Announcements**

S. Heinrich welcomed those present and reviewed the evening's agenda. He indicated that the Board would not be taking any votes on the budget until the work session and that Public Participation would be after the scheduled budget presentations.

S. Heinrich asked Superintendent M. Chiafery, MMS Principal D. Woelflin, and MHS Principal K. Johnson to come forward and confirm whether the figures regarding potential class sizes provided in the minority report at the last meeting were accurate. Superintendent Chiafery stated not all figures were accurate. Principal Woelflin stated the figures regarding the middle school were accurate. M. Chiafery asked that Principal Johnson be allowed to discuss the figures when he arrived.

## **Department Presentations**

### **Food Services**

Department Head: Dave Dziki

Committee Liaisons: S. Heinrich, C. Lang, and A. Schneider

Liaison Report: A. Schneider reported the liaisons spent a lot of time discussing the need for and effects of the lunch price increase. He said that the increase will cover the proposed budget and that safeguards are now in place to predict budget issues before they happen. C. Lang told the Committee that one way the department has chosen to reduce spending is to not fill a currently vacant position at the middle school and to eliminate two additional positions – one at the elementary school level and one at the upper elementary school. She noted that the purchase of new equipment has paid off by reducing equipment maintenance costs. S. Heinrich stated he felt the department has worked hard to come up with a fair and reasonable budget.

M. Shevenell reported that at one time the Food Service Surplus Fund had about \$189,000 in it. He indicated the fund had been used to purchase the POS terminals, freezers, warming tables and other equipment. However, the fund has now been drawn down. He said the hope is that the lunch price increase will hold at least through next year and that the issue will be revisited sooner rather than later.

Discussion included the following:

- Lunch prices are expected to stay the same and will not go down.
- The lunch price increase went into effect on January 4<sup>th</sup>.
- Initial indications are that the buying pattern at the elementary, upper elementary and middle schools are the same. The buying pattern at the high school changed, possibly due to exam week.
- Number of meals sold has remained the same, but revenue is up.

At this time, MHS Principal Johnson arrived and S. Heinrich asked him the same question he had asked M. Chiafery and D. Woelflin earlier. K. Johnson said the figures in the minority report were not accurate.

### **Merrimack Middle School (MMS)**

Principal and Assistant Principal: Deboruah Woelflin and Adam Carragher

Committee Liaisons: C. Lang, M. Publicover and C. Underhill

Liaison Report: C. Lang told the Committee that the liaisons discussed the decreased funding for field trips. She said that Administration would be evaluating the educational value of prior fieldtrips and making recommendations regarding future field trips. Project Safeguard was not funded because the school has received a grant and will run a similar program instead. A Spanish teaching position has been eliminated due to the declining school student enrollment as well as fewer numbers of students taking Spanish. Administration is encouraging the development of classroom libraries and the budget includes funds to give each teacher a small amount of money to purchase books for this endeavor. In addition, the budget includes funds for bookcases to hold these classroom libraries. C. Lang said a heavy-duty shredder has also been requested because the old one often breaks down due to heavy usage and a new one would result in more efficient use of staff time. She closed her report by stating that there is an increase in the art supply account to purchase a higher quality of paint but this increase is offset by decreasing the social studies supply account. C. Underhill said the biggest takeaway from the liaison meeting was the proposed cut of four teachers or one cluster. He said that Administration was going to minimize the impact of this cut by creative uses of staffing. M. Publicover stated that most of the liaison meeting was spent on the staff reductions. He indicated that not all students remain in the same classes at one time so that the student ratios would not be 27:1 at all times. He indicated that there are 3 Special Education teachers in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade which would mean one per cluster and that their presence reduces the student-teacher ratio. He indicated there were questions about whether the mandate regarding the maximum number of students in a science lab applied to the middle school, but if it did, school administrators indicated that would request a waiver or find a way to live with it.

D. Woelflin told the Committee that she had found that the requirement that there can only be 24 students in a science lab does apply to the middle school. She indicated that the para-professionals are usually student specific and probably could not be used to help reduce overall student-teacher ratios in science labs. She indicated that she is looking for other ways to ameliorate this situation. She pointed out to the Committee that her budget includes purchasing acrylic paint instead of watercolor paint for use in Art Classes by sharing examples of student work. She told the Committee that recently a middle school student had received a state art award.

Discussion included the following points:

- Most field trip accounts have been eliminated. Administration indicated this was due to inequity in the field trips. Not everyone went on field trips. M. Shevenell told the Committee that a total of \$9,414 had been cut and the breakdown was as follows: English – \$1,627, World Language – \$1,000, Science – \$2,787 and Social Studies – \$4,000. Members asked for more information, which Administration agreed to provide.
- The Project Safeguard has \$1 in it. Depending on grant funding, the administration will evaluate the new program to see if it is as good or better than Project Safeguard.
- Eliminating one 7<sup>th</sup> grade teaching team:
  - Mrs. Woelflin indicated that eliminating the teaching team was not something that she had suggested.
  - Eliminating a team at some future point had been discussed. Projections show enrollment going down by 36 students next year and 60 students the following year.
  - Mrs. Woelflin has started researching options: some classes will be larger, people will have changed roles and responsibilities; however, she is opposed to eliminating the team model as research shows the team model is best for children of this age group.
  - Mrs. Woelflin said she had hoped to have one more year to develop a plan to implement three teaching teams instead of four.
  - It is not possible to eliminate half a team.
  - Biggest issue is the dramatic change to class size.
  - Whatever happens they will work very hard to ensure a good educational experience for the students.
  - When the middle school opened, there were four teams of four teachers, each teacher having approximately 24 students.
  - The enrollment decline has been gradual.
  - Some of the teaching teams have been together a long time.
  - The cuts would be made following the “reduction in force” (RIF) guidelines in the contract. The newest hires are the first to go, based on core content per building.
  - The four teachers who would be eliminated are not all on the same team; so four teaching teams will be affected.
  - Population projections show other upcoming grades currently have 302 to 336 students.

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- Next year's 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades are both projected to be approximately the same size. The decision was made to cut the 7<sup>th</sup> grade team, as 7<sup>th</sup> graders would just be starting middle school.
- World Language
  - A world language teacher was cut because class sizes are presently 10 to 11 students
  - Next year class sizes will be smaller.
  - World language is an elective.
  - Administration will provide actual totals and ratios.
- The graphing calculators used at the middle school are the same ones used at the high school.

S. Heinrich called a brief recess at 8 PM.  
The meeting resumed at 8:07 PM

### **Library/Media Services**

Department Head: Nancy Rose  
Committee Liaisons: M. Publicover  
R. Buckley  
S. Heinrich

Liaison report: M. Publicover reported that the budget had been prepared with help from Pamala Tinker, the previous department head. He indicated that the library media services department covers all libraries in all schools, but does not cover classroom libraries. He said that each school library submits requests, which the budget has tried to meet. The budget also tries to balance the collection by subject and has put a little extra into the JMUES library as it is not quite up to standard. He also said that while there are some budget increases, there are some budget decreases; for example: maps. M. Publicover indicated that much map information is available online for free. He also indicated that the periodical line has remained constant because while students prefer on-line version of magazines, hard copy serve a staff educational function. The licensing fee increase is for the library automation software. The audiovisual equipment budget line is up 19% and that line was up 50% last year due to the prior year's equipment budget line being \$0. He said the Technology plan called for \$18,000 to be budgeted this year and the request ("wish") list amount was \$24,000 but the amount in the budget is \$7000 so this budget is nowhere near where it should be. He said that the wall-mounted televisions are now out-dated, replaced by data projectors. He ended his remarks by saying the department has many older items which are still used. R. Buckley said he agreed with M. Publicover's report. S. Heinrich stated there are less books being rebound and fewer books purchased due to cost increases. He also said the camcorders are being used by students for class projects and the videography class.

N. Rose said she had nothing to add at this time.

Discussion included the following points:

- There is no “big ticket” item in the budget. The budget does contain lots of little items though.
- There were many requests for data projectors, but across the board replacements are not part of this budget.
- Automation system
  - Changes the way the collection is managed.
  - The system is faster and easier than the old card system.
  - The system allows the department to collect data and statistics, deliver services more efficiently and keep better track of the inventory.
  - Some of the savings realized are in staff time.
  - Library staffing has remained the same.
  - Annual maintenance
    - The cost is \$16,000.
    - This amount is included in the \$36,000 budgeted for licensing. (The rest of the \$36,000 is new and on-going licenses.)
    - Covers support, upgrades, and maintenance.
    - Will be an annual expenditure.
- JMUES/MMS collection
  - A lot of the collection from the old middle school went to the current middle school.
  - The collection at the upper elementary school was made up of what was left over and some materials from the elementary collections.
  - For several years, the department has been trying to complete the collection there as well as build the collection at the middle school.
  - Ms. Rose agreed to provide more information about how long it will take to bring both collections up to standard.
- Periodicals are part of the research process and will continue to be in the budget.

### **High School**

Principal and Assistant Principals – Ken Johnson, Cheryl Smith, Peter Bergeron, and Rich Zampieri

Liaisons: A. Schneider, M. Beck, A. Sylvia

K. Johnson told the committee that most budget line items have been reduced or level funded. He said, however, that there were increases proposed to purchase Algebra II texts, additional equipment for Technical Education and furniture for at least one classroom as well as adjustments to fund athletic official and transportation accounts that had been previously under-funded. He requested that the budget discussion be divided into two parts: the budget pages and the elimination of teaching positions.

Liaison report: A. Schneider told the Committee that little time in the liaison meeting was spent on the amount of the budget because overall, he felt there wasn't anything out of line. He said the textbook replacements made sense and since the school has run out of spare parts to be used to fix furniture, the furniture replacement seems to be justified.

A. Sylvia said that the technology for getting the textbooks was not really available. M. Beck told the Committee he thought the budget made sense before the second round of cuts.

Discussion included the following points:

- Minority report clarifications
  - The only number presented in the minority report that was incorrect was that for 2010-2011, there will be 14 full-time teachers, 1 part-time teacher and 1 department head in the math department.
  - The number of teachers for Social Studies for both grades 9 and 10 were correct.
  - All other numbers were correct.
  - The class size numbers were based on this year's numbers and this year's program of studies. Next year's class selections haven't been made yet.
  - However, all levels of English will be offered and next year's English class sizes will be roughly the same as this year's numbers.
- Trip to China
  - The students pay student cost.
  - Cost for staff is \$2,500 per teacher plus \$170 for the visa. This is usually paid for through staff development funds.
  - Ten teachers will be going on the trip in April.
  - The trip covers one week of regular school and one week of vacation time.
  - Substitutes are hired for the missed school week and cost \$80 each, per day.
- Student load for guidance staff is 350:1.
- Staff Reductions:
  - Given a choice between new algebra texts or a math teacher, Administration would prefer the teacher. The cost of the replacement texts is \$20,336.
  - Administration was initially asked to prepare a fiscally responsible budget and reduce staff by 3.5 positions. The positions cut were English, Health, Science and ½ Business teacher.
  - For the second round of budget reductions, administration was asked to cut 2.5 positions. The positions cut this time were Guidance, Math and ½ Business teacher.
  - Eliminating a Social Studies position was not considered.
  - Administration will not allow class sizes beyond state standards. It may reduce electives offered so that there will be sufficient sections of required courses to ensure that.
  - Administration tries to keep the college prep level course student teacher ratio at 25:1, standard level course student teacher ratio at 20:1 and fundamental level course student teacher ratio at 12:1.
  - In Math and English specifically, student teacher ratios are getting close to 29:1 for standard level and 32:1 for college prep.

- Administration indicated they were asked to look for staff reductions rather than reductions in other budget areas. They agreed to look at the budget to see if there were other possible reductions rather than staff.
- If the part-time business teacher was reinstated, possibly the school store could stay open.
- In order for students to get a college credit for taking the sports marketing course, the business teacher presenting the course has to be a certified sports management instructor.
- State minimum standards are as follows: recommended class size is 25 students; maximum class size is 30 students.

J. Thornton told the Committee that while the minority report data is technically correct, it does not take into account the human factor. She said that class sizes have never been as high as the minority report chart indicates. She said Administration will make class size adjustments so that there won't be large class sizes and that we need to trust them to do what they are paid to do so that class numbers will be broken out as responsibly as they can while keeping the interests of the students as their first priority.

#### **District Wide**

Department Head: Superintendent M. Chiafery

Assistant Superintendent Dr. M. McLaughlin

Business Administrator M. Shevenell

Committee Liaisons: S. Heinrich, C. Lang, A. Schneider.

Liaison report: C. Lang reported that the proposed budget reflects a guaranteed maximum health insurance increase of 19.8% as well as mandatory increased contributions of 8% for support staff and 15% for professional staff to the retirement system. S. Heinrich reported that the District has no control over the amount of the retirement contribution and by statute must pay what is requested. He said to get out of the NH Retirement System would be a costly measure, with no long term savings. He also said the District Wide budget includes transportation and the District will be going into the 5<sup>th</sup> year of a 5 year contract. He said that due to the contract, First Student could not charge the District extra to cover increases in fuel costs. He concluded by saying that the Superintendent had put \$22,000 in the budget to pay for the traffic control officer and crossing guard that the Town Council had cut from its proposed budget and that the School Board had cut that line item. A. Schneider reported that, in general, the big increases in the District Wide budget were retirement and health insurance, which the District can't control and has to pay. He said otherwise, some things went up and some went down. He noted that the budgeted numbers are pretty accurate. He stated that it was his understanding that Town Manager Hickey has suggested a way to reinstate the money for the crossing guard and traffic officer in the Town's operating budget.

Discussion included the following points:

- Health Insurance Increase
  - The budget is up \$1,035,000 due to the guaranteed health insurance increase. All proposed staff reductions have been factored into this figure.

- Recent history of maximum guarantee to actual
  - 05-06: 8.5% to 4.5%
  - 06-07: 17.4% to 15.4%
- One year the maximum increase was 25%
- The School District's gross health insurance costs are less than the town's health insurance costs.
- The District bid the health insurance 5 or 6 years ago. Bids were reviewed with staff and current carrier was retained.
- The District offers three health plans: JY, POS (Blue Choice) and HMO (Matthew Thornton), but is not limited to three plans and could go to the carrier (Local Government Center) to get other options.
- Offering a high deductible health insurance plan was suggested.
- Pay for Performance
  - By contract the District must budget \$1000 per professional staff member.
  - By contract, money not spent for this item goes back to reduce taxes.
  - The proposed amount, factoring in proposed staff cuts, is \$363,000.
- M. Chiafery explained the following steps in the budget process
  - August/September – leadership team went to School Board for direction and were told to focus on replacing the technology labs at the elementary school, stick with the furniture replacement schedule and come in lower than the default budget.
  - Administration reviewed declining enrollments and course offerings.
  - Administration suggested staffing levels so that the student teacher ratios were mirror images per grade level, per school. As a result, an additional kindergarten teacher was requested.
  - Administration asked each principal to look at staff levels. As a result, the original budget included 9.5 staff reductions.
  - Administration was also aware there was a major capital project that needed to be funded: the RFS roof.
  - At its December 15<sup>th</sup> meeting, a majority of the School Board suggested that more needed to be cut from the original budget proposal. There were questions about the student-teacher ratio in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade.
  - The high school is still a school in need of improvement.
  - Administration looked for things that could be put off and proposed eliminating replacing the rug in the JMES library and an asbestos abatement project at TFS.
  - The Administration has tried to balance the needs of the School Board and the needs of the students.
- Retirement Incentive
  - By contract, the School Board must approve 10 early retirement requests.
  - This year 11 staff members applied for early retirement; 10 requests were approved.
  - Eliminating the salaries of those 10 staff members reduced the proposed budget by \$69,000.
  - A few years ago, the number of requests that the Board had to approve was increased from 7 to 10.



- District In Need of Improvement (DINI)
  - 2 Schools still have DINI status
  - The original DINI grant funding is no longer available.
  - The District has kept DINI lines in the budget, and wants funds to do summer programs.
  - The District will spend the money it has and write grants if further funding is needed.
  - The District is mandated to develop and implement plans, monitor results and submit reports to the state.
- Administration feels there are no areas in the budget that can be cut other than teachers.
- Possibly all upcoming roof repair projects could be lumped into one big bonded project.

### **Default Budget**

S. Heinrich asked M. Shevenell to give a brief overview of the default budget.

M. Shevenell told the Committee that the process of developing the default budget is spelled out in the statutes. The default budget basically equals the current budget, increased by contractual obligations and reduced by one-time expenditures. He indicated that the step raises for the support staff, per the evergreen statute, are included in the default budget, which he indicated was \$65,424,662.

### **Public Participation**

S. Heinrich said the next meeting was a work session on February 2<sup>nd</sup> and the deadline for petitioned warrant articles was February 9<sup>th</sup>. He stated that Committee had received a number of emails, which would become part of the permanent record and called for public participation.

Roy Swonger (Klara Drive and School Board member) told the Committee that if the School Board had to approve more retirement incentive requests, he didn't know whether more teachers would apply. He said that the District had 26 students per class in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade in 2004. He said that the School Board hoped to have a major bonded project next year and he wasn't sure about bonding all of the roofs. He indicated that an article in the Nashua Telegraph states that Merrimack has the 6<sup>th</sup> highest cost per student of area schools; however, he said, cost per student is only one measure. He said that one also has to look at quality, graduation rate, retention rate, test scores and building costs. He ended his comments by saying that the proposed budget is up 1%, even with a 2.3 % decrease in enrollment.

Shannon Kane (Scotch Pine Lane) told the Committee that the math teacher who will be cut at the high school is also the cross-country coach. She said that, since this person has been the coach, the cross-country team has improved from 14<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> with the whole varsity going to state and the coach winning coach of the year. Ms. Kane said that, while she hadn't had the person as a teacher, she was grateful for everything the coach had

done for her. She ended her remarks by saying the School District needs great teachers and coaches like this math teacher.

Abby Smith (Parker Drive) and Hailey Watson (Meadowview) told the Committee that one of the middle school teachers whose position would be eliminated had coached the girls soccer team which made it to the play-offs. They indicated that the teachers whose positions would be cut were good people and exceptional teachers whose positions should not be cut.

Mary Hardwick (Whitewood Lane) told the Committee that she was speaking from experience about the need for both academics and supporting courses. He indicated that one of her children had taken a Marketing Course and as a result, Marketing was now his college focus. She said that eliminating the second Business Teacher would limit the number of business courses offered. She said she was concerned about the education offered to all students. She ended her remarks by reading a letter from NH DECA, which indicated, without the second business teacher, it was likely that the DECA program at the high school would cease to exist.

Audrey Rodgers (Klara Drive) told the Committee she appreciated all their questions during the budget presentations. She said that she was a concerned parent and a concerned educator and that she felt that an imbalance on the School Board was pushing for the deep cuts. She said she didn't think her child's best interests would be served by larger class sizes. She urged the Committee to consider the budget the Superintendent had originally proposed.

Caitlyn Sylvia (Merrymeeting Drive) told the Committee she was speaking in favor of keeping the math teacher for the benefit of current and future students.

To close Public Participation, S. Heinrich read the following letter to the Committee:

*Please read the following letter into the meeting minutes, as I am unsure if I am able to attend due to a coaching conflict. Thank you.*

*Merrimack School District Budget Committee:*

*Many of you will not recognize my name as I am a new resident of Merrimack, NH. My husband and I bought the house at 76 Patten Road for many reasons, but a major one was the school district. I grew up in a town next door to Merrimack where the concern for and support of education has always been great. I grew up with strong values that a good education would lead to good outcomes in life. This is not just a childhood philosophy, but has been carried into my adult life and career.*

*I currently teach in a much larger neighboring district that appears to not value education as Merrimack has. Our last contract cycle was a struggle and we as teachers made many concessions for our students. Currently, we are between six and eight million dollars in the red. We are forced to make cuts that will be*

*detrimental to the students that I teach and will cost them in the future.*

*One of the classroom practicalities I was taught in my professional education deals with classroom size or student to teacher ratio. While some may think that it is easier to teach students, as they grow older, those who work within the realm of education realm understand that the challenges are just different. I believe it was school board member Thornton who stated: "Size is not an issue in the middle school because it's not like the teachers have to get the kids in his/her snowsuits." Statements like this epitomize the Board's failure to recognize the challenges faced in the upper grades when class sizes are large. As students get older, the need to bond and communicate with adults is much more significant than that of a first grader. Having larger class sizes limits the ability for a teacher, no matter how good, to reach each and every student that enters his or her classroom. That, as I understand it, is one of the biggest initiatives the Merrimack School District has undertaken in its professional development and is seen at the heart of the state's Follow the Child initiative.*

*Where I work, there are often 28-30 kids in a classroom. These students often fail to make the bonds necessary for a lucrative education. This was proven during a workshop day. Teachers were asked to put a dot next to every student they know. Knowing a student did not mean recognizing a face or knowing a name; it meant actually knowing something about the student. The number of kids who went completely or barely recognized by staff was staggering. When students are connected to teachers, they value education.*

*I graduated from a high school with small class sizes and with teachers who were able to make those connections with the students that came into his/her classroom. This not only helped myself to be the best individual that I can be, but also made many of my fellow graduates to do the same. I would not have become as confident in who I am as an educator and a student if it weren't for the connections I received in high school.*

*In your deliberations, I would like you to consider all the facts you have been presented and impact you have on this school district and its budgetary process. I thank you for your time, and hope that you will take action to amend the recommendations of the school board in its impact on class sizes.*

*Sincerely,  
Rebecca Wurst Martel  
76 Patten Road*

**Other**

S. Heinrich reminded members that they could reply to any email received through the generic Budget Committee email address, but that they should not "Reply All."

S. Heinrich stated that members should be aware that there are some school costs, which might not have been included in the costs per pupil newspaper article that was mentioned during public participation. He said members should make careful comparisons.

**Next Meeting**

S. Heinrich indicated that the next meeting would be on February 2<sup>nd</sup>. He told the Committee it would review warrant articles first and then have a work session, followed by public participation. He said the following meeting (February 9<sup>th</sup>) was the Public Hearing, after which the Committee would reconvene and finalize the budget figure that goes to Deliberative Session. He reminded members that, while the Committee was making bottom line cuts, members should come prepared to provide a page number, account number or some other indicator of where the adjustment they were requesting could be found. He said that the budget would be reviewed department by department and that once a department's budget had been reviewed, it would not be revisited until the night of the Public Hearing out of respect for department heads who might leave after their budgets were reviewed. He requested that members who found additional adjustments in budget that had already been reviewed notify him so that the particular budget could be revisited the night of the Public Comment Hearing.

S. Heinrich requested that M. Shevenell provide advance copy of the warrant articles so the Committee can review them before the meeting. S. Heinrich reminded the Committee that it would only be making recommendations on monied warrant articles.

**Comments from the Committee**

T. Beard stated the night of the Public Hearing (February 9<sup>th</sup>) is also the deadline for petitioned warrant articles. He noted that nothing new could be added to the budget once the Committee finalized it after the Public Hearing. The Public Hearing starts at 7:30 PM; however, the Committee meeting starts at 7 PM.

M. Publicover thanked the School District for providing the budget in excel format. He said he found it useful to follow trends. He said that seeing some budget lines with \$0 was worthwhile.

A. Sylvia made a MOTION to adjourn. Second: C. Lang. MOTION PASSED.

S. Heinrich adjourned the meeting at 10:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Heinrich