

Merrimack School District Budget Committee  
Minutes  
January 25, 2022

Present: S. Adler, S. Albuquerque, D. Coakley, G. Groff, L. French, C. Lang (by phone), C. Mower, M. Murphy, N. Schoenfeld and School Board liaison L. Peters

Excused: G. Savitch, B. Stisser and E. Wilson

Also Present: Interim Chief Educational Officer B. Olsen, Business Administrator M. Shevenell, Assistant Superintendent K. Yarlott and various department heads

C. Mower called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

C. Mower told the Committee that C. Lang was attending the meeting via speakerphone and as a result, any vote taken during the meeting would be a roll call vote. C. Lang told the Committee she was in Satellite Beach, Florida and there was no one in the room with her.

**Department Budget Reviews**

Department Head: David Dziki

Liaisons: E. Wilson, L. French, C. Lang

D. Dziki told the Committee that Food Service is self-supported. However, this year as last year, students get 1 free meal per day and the District is being reimbursed by the Federal government. He said fewer meals were served in the schools last year because students alternated which days they attended in-person and no students attended in person on Fridays. He indicated there had been supply chain issues, especially with paper products and substitutions in some food products. He also said his department depends on USDA commodities which were not always available. He said he was able to get fresh fruit and vegetables which provided a good supplement to the food service meals. He indicated that he tried to keep the budget as level as possible.

Liaison Report: L. French asked D. Dziki to explain the food distribution process.

D. Dziki said that the high school, the middle school and Mastricola Upper Elementary have “production” kitchens. Each production kitchen prepares meals for itself and another school. The District owns a van that delivers meals from the high school to Thorntons Ferry and then from the middle school to Reeds Ferry. He said it is very important that the District has a well-maintained van to deliver hot food on time to the other schools.

Discussion included the following:

- Commodity foods are supplied by the Federal Department of Agriculture. The amount the District receives are based on the number of meals served last year. Generally frozen meats and canned fruits and vegetables are supplied.
- Demand for free lunches waned last summer and it appears that meals will not be offered this summer.
- Members thanked the department for its continuing efforts to provide meals during the pandemic.

- Whether the Federal Government will pay for meals for all next year is being discussed but has not been decided.

### **Student Services**

Department Head: Heather Barker

Liaisons: N. Schoenfeld, S. Adler, B. Stisser

H. Barker told the Committee that her Department is charged by the state and federal government with providing special education services regardless of the pandemic. She said last year's budget was increased to provide extended year services to meet the Individual Education Plan (I.E.P.) needs as well as to prepare and transition students for fall placements. She noted that the proposed budget included this increased funding because she anticipates there will still be a need for tutoring to overcome learning gaps as well as additional psychological, social and emotional issues that need to be addressed. She said the proposed budget also includes a full summer program. She indicated that hiring staff and contracted service providers has been challenging so the budget line for service providers was increased by 3%. She also said the department is working to engage parents and offer monthly programming for the parents.

Liaison Report: N. Schoenfeld said the liaison team focused on special education as well as Social and Emotional Learning (S.E.L.) needs. She said the proportion of students in the District that have I.E.P.s is in line with the state average. She also said there are fewer Out of District placements (O.D.P.) this year. She said the funds that have been added are for good purposes.

Discussion included the following:

- S.E.L.
  - The District chose to have S.E.L. infused throughout each school culture.
  - The Second Step Program provides a daily life skills lesson which is taught every day by classroom teachers as a regular part of the Kindergarten - 6 program.
  - The middle and high school have an advisory period or extended homeroom during which students and teachers can check in with each other.
  - Resources are available in the summer as well.
- There is some funding in the budget for books about diversity, inclusion and disabilities to be added to the school libraries.
- The Department is working to develop collaborations with other Districts to forge partnerships to work together to find providers and help keep provider costs down.
- Extended year program
  - Is required by law for students with disabilities
  - The department will make the program available to any student whose parent is concerned about summer regression.
  - The District is looking at a range of services to offer including 5-6 week in-person program, small groups, individual services, family partnerships with providers, Zoom sessions, etc,
- Para-educators
  - The role of a para-educator is to carry out duties assigned in the I.E.P.: communication support, pre-education, re-teaching, practicing, mobility, some care needs, liaison, etc.

- Each works under the direction of a Special Education teacher.
- Student Services provided a 4-hour professional development course for them last year and plans to continue that practice this coming year.
- Crisis intervention and crisis management training lines have gone up because the cost of training in these areas has gone up.
- Special Ed costs do not qualify for Covid reimbursement, but the District does get Medicaid reimbursement and state Special Ed reimbursement. This could amount to \$1.2 million dollars, but the aid is received the year following expenditure.
- Summer “recovery” programs may qualify for Covid grants, but the entire cost of the program has been put in the budget and the District may get some revenue to offset.
- This year there are some students with O.D.P.s and costs are up.
- The District is filing for grants to cover the costs of S.E.L. as well as Covid recovery programs.
- There are some physical therapists and speech and language therapists that are District employees but in order to meet all I.E.P needs, the District also has to contract providers for these services. The District will also be doing an RFP for providers.

### **Technology/Library Media Services**

Technology and Library Media Services Director Jason Pelletier

Liaisons: B. Stisser, D. Coakley & M. Murphy

M. Shevenell told the Committee that he had created the budget. M. Shevenell said the District has 1,729 leased computers and the lease will end in FY22-23. He said the District used Covid grant money to purchase a new server, cabling, 1,700 Chromebooks, 400 I-pads, and a multitude of wireless devices

J. Pelletier told the Committee that the District is at or very near its goal of one device per student and the goal is to maintain this ratio. He said he is currently doing an inventory of what the District has, projecting needs, developing a recycle/replacement plan, evaluating infrastructure, and looking at replacing the network equipment.

Liaison Report: D. Coakley told the Committee that said the liaisons discussed budget increases in the areas of software licensing, computer repairs, and networking equipment – especially switches. The liaisons also discussed the concept of “Bring Your Own Device.”

Discussion included the following:

- Technology
  - The computer repair line will probably continue to rise as the District now owns and maintains almost 5,000 devices.
  - The School Board is opposed to students and/or staff bringing their own devices due to security risks and legal concerns over staff and student privacy.
  - Higher end computers are concentrated at the high school.
  - Some classes and some students require specific devices.
  - Another computer technician was hired to help deal with all the new devices.
  - In the future,
    - The District may have to re-engineer and centralize the network

- M. Shevenell is hoping to use grant money to pay for some of the associated costs.
- The District is looking at options to expand bandwidth.
- The District should look at the differences in cost and benefits between leasing and purchasing computers and networking equipment.
- The District gets a universal, educational rate for internet.
- The District replaces computer equipment based on age and software capability of each device.
- Library
  - The libraries in all schools are well outfitted.
  - There is a continued focus on building classroom libraries with leveled readers.
  - Many texts are now on-line, but there is still a need for pleasure reading books.

### **Maintenance**

Department Head: Tom Touseau (participated online)

Liaison: N. Schoenfeld, S. Adler, C. Lang

The Committee took a brief recess from 8:30 PM – 8:40 PM to get T. Touseau on the Zoom connection.

T. Touseau told the Committee that there were three items of note in the Maintenance budget:

1. Building Upkeep: \$30,000 was included in the budget for site work for a new ADA compliant playground at Thorntons Ferry School. The PTF is donating the equipment.
2. Energy Retrofit/Lease costs: This is the second-year payment (\$370,000) on the 10-year lease/purchase agreement for ventilator units.
3. Utility costs: Utility costs have gone up because while the electricity cost is fixed until 2024, the distribution cost has gone up and the ventilators are run 24/7 at the recommendation of DHHS.

Liaison Report: N. Schoenfeld said the budget is basically level funded, though costs due to Covid are changing. She noted the ADA accessible playground is a wonderful idea but she has a concern that a level funded budget in a time of rising costs will leave the department under-funded.

Discussion included the following:

- Using Covid funds, the District has been able to stock up on cleaning supplies and other needed items. The Department hopes that the proposed budget plus the stockpile will be sufficient.
- Energy Light Retrofit
  - The energy light retrofit includes replacing all inside and outside fluorescent lights with LED lights at all schools except for the middle school.
  - Energy costs will be maintained for 4 years and then energy costs will go down.
  - The middle school may be addressed at a later date.

- The District has and will continue to look at solar power, but it is not considering this at this time. A structural engineer needs to evaluate roofs regarding weight bearing capability.
- The Trustees of the Trust Funds might be able to provide funds for the site work for the playground at Thorntons Ferry.
- Brentwood
  - A draft warrant article to demolish was removed from the warrant by the School Board.
  - The District is still paying utility and insurance costs for that building.
  - There might be some savings in demolition costs by doing that while constructing a new Administrative Building.
  - There is a concern about potential damage to the land after demolition and before the master plan is fully developed.
  - There is no intended use for the Brentwood building.
  - The master plan will not be implemented in one year or as one project.
  - Maybe a specific year could be designated as the “end date” after which the building will be demolished.
  - The School Board feels that there are some very important warrant articles that need to pass and Brentwood is not a high priority.

### **District-Wide**

Department Heads: Interim Chief Educational Officer B. Olsen, Business Administrator M. Shevenell, and Assistant Superintendent K. Yarlott  
Committee Liaisons: E. Wilson, L. French and C. Lang

B. Olsen told the Committee that the District-Wide budget carries costs for employee benefits and salaries in addition to professional development, service-learning programs, and contractual obligations. He said the District has received a guaranteed maximum rate that the health insurance costs will decrease 1.4% and the actual cost may decrease further but can't go up.

M. Shevenell said that the only bond left to pay off is the middle school and the last bond payment will be during FY 2023-2024. He said FY 2024-25 may be a good time to consider bonding roofs or a new Administrative office building. He also said that transportation contracts are in the District-Wide Budget. He said this is the last year of the bus contract and he hopes to negotiate an extension of the contract. He noted the bus contract does not contain a fuel escalation cost – so there has been no effect on transportation costs due to rising fuel costs and in fact, since less fuel was used, the District received a fuel credit from the bus company. He said the District was able to maintain the contract by using buses to deliver meals and classroom packets to families throughout town which was a requirement to receive Covid funds. In addition, the bus company is a key part of the Emergency Management Team.

Discussion included the following

- Capital Reserve Fund

- It might be prudent to resume funding Capital Reserve Accounts for roofs and paving using the Unassigned Fund Balance (surplus).
- Surplus is money that has already been raised from the taxpayers.
- Surplus goes back to the town to reduce taxes.
- There is going to be a warrant article to allow the District to annually retain up to 5% of the District's net assessment (budget less revenue and state aid).
- The overall budget is 1.4% higher than last year's budget.

**Member Comments**

S. Adler suggested that if the Committee's meetings were live on cable, the Committee might want to allow people to email comments to the Committee during the meeting like the School Board does.

N. Schoenfeld said there is a lot of risk in putting the Thorntons Ferry roof in a warrant article instead of in the operating budget because if the article fails, "No means No."

S. Adler said he was concerned that many needed projects are being delayed. He said he wants to be sure that things are properly maintained and maybe some needed maintenance projects need to be put in the budget.

S. Albuquerque said some people only look at the budget number rather than review the important items the budget contains and vote down the budget article.

L. Peters said that there is likely to be a roofing project either in the budget or as a warrant article every year for the next several years.

**Next Meeting**

C. Mower told the Committee the next Committee meeting will be February 1<sup>st</sup> at 7 PM and the snow date is February 3<sup>rd</sup>. The agenda will include a work session on the operating budget and discussion of articles currently on the warrant.

S. Albuquerque made a MOTION to adjourn. Second: S. Adler.

C. Mower declared the meeting adjourned at 10:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Heinrich