

**MINUTES OF BOARD OF EDUCATION SPECIAL BUSINESS MEETING
HELD VIRTUALLY FEBRUARY 4, 2021 AT 7:30 PM**

Board Members Present: Anthony Perugini-Chair; Adam Grippo-Vice Chair; Kathryn Hallen-Secretary; Faith Ham, Anne Harrigan, Andrew Martelli, Timothy White

Board Members Absent: None

Administrators Present: Jeffrey F. Solan, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools; Marlene Silano, Assistant Superintendent of Schools; Vincent Masciana, Chief Operating Officer

Public access made available through live streaming the Cheshire Public Schools YouTube Channel at www.youtube.com/cheshirepublicschools . Public comments were accepted at CPSCovid19@cheshire.k12.ct.us .

1. CALL TO ORDER – 7:30 P.M.

- A. Roll for Quorum. The roll was called and a quorum determined.
- B. Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.
Mr. Perugini led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

2. AUDIENCE

Ms. Hallen read an extensive letter from Mr. Adam Stern (on file) who is very unhappy that the students at Cheshire High School are not attending full time. He expressed that he is very unhappy with the high school administration, the Superintendent and the Board of Education.

Dr. Solan said he also received an email from a parent (on file) asking where the two additional elementary teachers in the 2021-2022 Budget will be placed. Dr. Solan replied that Doolittle will be reduced by two teachers, Highland will increase by two teachers, and Norton and Darcey will both increase by one teacher. This is a net increase of two teachers. The current average classroom has 17.8 students, and with the increase in enrollment, the ratio will increase to 18.3, including the two additional teachers.

3. SUPERINTENDENT’S UPDATE ON COVID-19

Dr. Solan reviewed that important considerations during this pandemic are mitigation strategies and compliance. Some of the mitigation strategies include spacing of students in classrooms, hallways and dining areas, common area cleaning and classroom cleaning, vaccination rates and school spread. He said fortunately, school spread has not been an issue. He noted all elementary schools and the middle school are in session full time, 5 days per week. They have missed 1 day of in-person school for COVID-19 at Highland due to late night notification of a positive case in September. At Cheshire High School, there are 3 full-day cohorts. He reported they have been gradually adding students at Cheshire High School. There are currently 91 students who attend in-person four days

per week, 15 attending in-person five days per week and 3 attending in-person three days per week.

The Superintendent said 13 of the 15 high schools in DRG B have a hybrid schedule like Cheshire High School. The two schools that are full-time are smaller than Highland elementary school. We currently have 109 students attending in person more than 2 days a week, 22 were added this past Monday. He said Principal Gadd will be surveying all families to see if they would like to add more days in-person. He said it is important to know that number before they can move forward. It is in our students' benefit to keep that remote Wednesday, so the students can all come together in same modality, all remote. They can do breakout groups, and Wellness Wednesdays to work on their overall well-being. He said they would like the students in school, but they want to be sure the students are safe. Bringing back students when we had a high rate of transmission would be reckless; that is why we waited until now when the number of cases are lower. He said he is grateful for the high school staff's energy. He said this is a global problem, not a Cheshire High School problem. They are working very hard to bring in more students, however lunch continues to be the biggest problem with masks off. As the weather gets warmer, they will be bringing the tents back, which will make it easier for the students to eat outside.

Mr. Perugini commented that it seems as though there is a spike at Cheshire High School with 9 positive cases. Dr. Solan responded that there are 7 positive cases at the high school now. They are generally family members spreading to each other. He said it is a constant concern that students will let their guard down while they are hanging out with friends. Everyone has to remain vigilant with masks.

Board members thanked Dr. Solan and said there is a lot of which we can be proud. The mitigation strategies kept numbers low. Ms. Ham said all staff from administrators to IA's need to be commended. She commented that whether or not we agree with Mr. Stern's letter is irrelevant. People are frustrated and are looking for something concrete. Mr. Grippo commended all staff, students and the community at-large. The community has to come together by following guidelines and bringing the infection rate down. In turn, we are bringing more students back to the high school. He said we have not turned a blind eye to the hybrid model or how our students are being affected. We discuss this every day. Mr. White said he agrees with Dr. Solan and hopes people don't let their guard down. He said he trusts the Superintendent to make the right decisions.

In regard to Mr. Stern's letter, Mr. Martelli said no one wanted to keep kids in school more than Dr. Solan. When districts throughout the state were closing their schools, we did everything possible to keep our kids in school. New Haven and Waterbury high school students have not been in school since November. He said the Board has doubled up on their meetings and done everything possible to keep these kids in school and frankly, he is insulted when someone says we are not doing everything possible.

Mr. Perugini said there has been a tremendous amount of information shared at the Board meetings. Chesprocott has presented to the Board and Dr. Solan has reviewed many statistics. There is a multitude of factors, hard data, and science that go into play with what we can and can't do. He said he understands the frustration at the high school. He has one daughter who is a junior and one was a senior last year. They have had to miss many events, such as the typical graduation. He said they are doing everything they can to get kids back into school safely. There just isn't enough space to get kids safely back in the cafeteria. Mr. Perugini said he commends every employee. He said he would encourage Mr. Stern to talk to Dr. Solan or Dr. Gadd if he has concerns in the future. Mr. Perugini stressed that the success of our community adhering to safety guidelines is going to dictate how quickly we can get students back into the high school.

4. **REPORTS OF STANDING COMMITTEES**

A. **FINANCE**

I. **Discussion and Possible Action Regarding the Approval of the 2021/22 Board of Education Budget.**

Mr. Grippo reported that the Finance Committee voted to bring forth the Superintendent's Recommended Budget to the full Board of Education for approval.

MOTION by Mr. Grippo, seconded by Mr. Martelli

Moved that the Cheshire Board of Education submit to the Town Manager, the Superintendent's proposed budget for 2021-2022 of \$78,487,052, an increase of \$3,893,126 over the current budget.

Discussion:

Mr. White said he supports this budget. He acknowledged is a very big increase relative to prior years where 1.17% is the average increase. He said he appreciates all that staff members are doing to work through this. He said he knows it is a big "ask" of the taxpayers but going into next year, this is a good budget considering the pandemic. It's not about hiring new staff, it will be all-hands-on-deck with everyone working together with the students to tackle any shortcomings.

Mr. Martelli said he will support the Superintendent's Recommended Budget. He said \$1.6 million of this budget is contractual increases and \$1.2 million is just restoring. The Board would obviously like to do more, but because of the pandemic, this budget is responsible and fair.

Mr. Grippo said he will support this motion. He said the increase is well beyond his comfort zone, but when you subtract the increase to the

medical benefits account, it is very reasonable. He said it is a borderline austerity budget even though it is an increase of \$3.8 million.

Ms. Harrigan said she has a “crisis of conscience.” She explained our budgets always had three parts - maintain, restore and advance. This budget is maintaining, it is not advancing at all, it is only restoring medical benefits, maintenance and equipment. She said she reviewed Dr. Solan’s “what if’s” list and looked at the 11 important items and we have not even discussed any of these goals. Ms. Harrigan said she knows she cannot include everything on the list but would like to include what she considers the five most essential items which would increase the budget by only \$400,000.

AMENDED MOTION by Ms. Harrigan, seconded by Ms. Hallen

MOVE to adopt a budget of \$78,887,052, an increase of \$4,293,126 over the current budget to include:
\$ 60,000 for a high school math interventionist
\$ 80,000 for an elementary technology coach
\$150,000 for elementary administrative support
\$ 80,000 for a reading & math specialist at Highland and Chapman
\$ 30,000 for districtwide professional development

Discussion:

Ms. Hallen said she agrees that we need to fund these items that will advance our schools. She said it is even more important to support our students in light of the fact that we are in a pandemic that has caused disruption to all of our students. She said she is very aware that this is a big budget, but these additions will enable us as a school system to have a more robust support system for our students. She said she completely supports this Amended Motion.

Ms. Ham said she appreciates where they are coming from, and it would be lovely to add these positions this year, but she knows we will have to make more cuts when this budget comes back from the Town Council, and if we add these items, what accounts would we cut. She said there are 75 mandates taking away from our programs now and she encourages the Board to put pressure on legislators to stop the mandates. If we could get the mandates lifted, we could add positions. She said she cannot support the Amended Motion.

Mr. Grippo said he will not be supporting the amendment although he agrees the extra supports may be needed. He said we look to the Superintendent and Chief Operating Officer who have identified what is needed to get us out of the medical benefits hole we are in. He said it will not be a perfect return to school next year, but both Ms. Carey and Ms. Silano said they believe they have the supports in place to get us back on the path to normalcy. He said although the amendment is well meaning, he cannot support it at this time.

Mr. Perugini said he agrees and sympathizes. He said he hopes we will go back to a normal environment in the fall, but we just don't know. We are fighting to get some normalcy and assessing our students and staff. He asked Dr. Solan if those items are needed. Dr. Solan said everything on that list is beneficial. He said his recommended budget is fiscally responsible. It does not move us forward, but they were trying to strike a balance this year.

Ms. Hallen said she appreciates that everyone would like to be able to fund Cheshire Public Schools at the highest level possible, if it didn't cause pain to taxpayers. The increases they are proposing in this amendment represent an increase of only \$400k of additional expenditures. She said her job as a Board Member is to advocate for the best education for the students. Last year, they underfunded the medical benefits and we are paying for that this year. She said last year, taxpayers got the benefit of lower taxes because their contributions to the medical benefits were cut. She asked her fellow board members to think about the amended budget.

Mr. White said he appreciates where the motion is coming from, but said this is the largest increase that the Board has requested. He thinks there are a lot of people who will have a lower Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) for 2020. He will not be supporting the Amended Motion.

Mr. Perugini said if Dr. Solan thought the items were critical, they would be included in the budget. He understands where Ms. Harrigan and Ms. Hallen are coming from, but these positions are not critical to start the new school year. He said he cannot support this Amended Motion.

Ms. Harrigan said we are the Board of Education, not the board of funding our medical benefits. She said she chose items that could be implemented this fall.

Public Comment:

Heather Cavallaro-Barghout shared in an email that she would like to commend everyone on the amazing job that they all do. She said she is deeply saddened by the state of the budget for our education in Cheshire. She said that what Cheshire has been able to do, given the budget, has been stellar. However, she feels we're at the point where serious investment needs to start to happen in our education for

our future and our children. They deserve the additional programs, they deserve the technology, and they deserve the facilities. Continuing to slash a budget will only hurt us long-term. It will hurt our town long-term. What we spend per child compared to our peers is appalling. She said they moved to this town for the education. She needs to start to see the investment in our education system. She said she hopes the Town Council ratifies the 5% increase.

The other email received asked if the district has explored privatized lunch services, to which the Superintendent answered, yes, they have spoken to numerous vendors over the years. There would be no cost savings. We do a much better job, and we have a very good program.

VOTE: The **AMENDED MOTION** failed 2 - 5 (Mr. Perugini, Mr. Grippo, Mr. Martelli, Ms. Ham and Mr. White opposed).

Mr. Perugini explained that the Board will now vote on the original Motion:

Moved that the Cheshire Board of Education submit to the Town Manager, the Superintendent's proposed budget for 2021-2022 of \$78,487,052, an increase of \$3,893,126 over the current budget.

Mr. Grippo thanked our teachers and administrators for their fair negotiations this year.

Ms. Hallen said she will support the Superintendent's recommended budget, although she wishes they could do more. She said she has no doubt that our children will be well-educated as we have an extremely talented district of teachers and administrators.

Mr. Perugini said they should discuss these positions next year. He noted that this budget does not take anything away. He said he is concerned with what comes back as the final budget from the Town Council as last year, we had a \$2 million reduction and we have no place else to cut in this budget.

VOTE: The Motion passed unanimously 6-1 (Ms. Harrigan opposed).

B. PLANNING

I. Approval of the 2021-22 through 2025-26 Capital Expenditure Plan and Budget.

Mr. Martelli stated that the Capital Expenditure Plan and Budget presented at the Planning Committee held on January 11, 2021 was revisited, as requested by the Committee, to provide an alternative for projects that can be moved from 2021-22 into future years based on school modernization recommendations that will be released in the near future.

Mr. Masciana explained the first-year request has been reduced from \$5,240,000 to a prioritized list of \$2,650,000, but that the total request for the five years remained the same at \$37,728,500. Mr. Masciana reviewed the plan. He said the requests are all maintenance related requests. The largest categories are \$11.1 million is for window replacements; \$8.1 million is for district paving, roofing, sidewalks and masonry; and \$5.5 million for district cafeteria improvements; \$3.2 million for HVAC improvements; \$2.6 million for Interior Building improvements; \$2.4 million for code compliance; \$1.7 million for fire alarm control systems; \$1 million for district lavatories; \$800,000 for flooring and ceiling tile replacement; \$680,000 for lighting and electrical improvements, and \$350,000 for Cheshire High School athletic complex improvements.

Mr. Masciana reviewed the one-year funding request of \$2,650,000. This includes \$500,000 for window replacements at Cheshire High School; \$1,075,000 for districtwide sidewalks and area grate replacements with priorities to be determined; \$175,000 for upgrades to the Norton cafeteria; \$350,000 for HVAC at Cheshire High School; \$250,000 for interior building improvements; \$150,000 to continue improvements to lavatories across the district, and \$50,000 for additional ADA stadium seating at the main gate field at Cheshire High School.

Mr. Perugini asked if any of these projects can wait until after the School Modernization Committee presents their plan. Mr. Masciana said it will be at least 3 years before any new buildings or renovations come to fruition. Some of these projects, such as the Dodd roof that is leaking, cannot wait. Mr. White said they would still have flexibility in the next few months to make changes.

MOTION by Mr. Martelli, seconded by Ms. Ham.

MOVED that the Cheshire Board of Education approve the Five Year Capital Expenditure Plan for Improvements to Current Buildings, in the total amount of \$37,728,500, with annual allocations as follows:

2021-22 - \$2,650,000
2022-23 - \$7,285,000
2023-24 - \$10,675,000
2024-25 - \$6,656,000
2025-26 - \$10,462,500

Discussion:

Mr. Grippo thanked the Planning Committee for paring down the plan to what is absolutely necessary for next year because of the School Modernization Committee plans. Mr. Martelli said once we know what the SMC decision is, it will make our decision much easier going forward.

VOTE: The Motion passed unanimously 7-0.

5. **ADJOURNMENT**

On a motion by Ms. Hallen and seconded by Mr. Grippo, the meeting was adjourned at 9:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Anthony Perugini, Board Chair

Attest:

Carol K. Jesensky, Board of Education Clerk

Filed at the Town Clerk's Office, Town Hall, Cheshire: February 17, 2021.