

**MINUTES OF BOARD OF EDUCATION BUDGET PRESENTATION MEETING
HELD IN TOWN COUNCIL CHAMBERS ON JANUARY 13, 2022 AT 7:30 PM**

Board Members Present: Anthony Perugini-Chair; Adam Grippo-Vice Chair; Anne Harrigan-Secretary; Faith Ham (7:31), , Andrew Martelli, Samantha Rosenberg, Timothy White (7:35)

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; Robin-Anne Carey, Director, Pupil Personnel Services; Mary Joscelyn-Gadd, Ed.D., Principal-Cheshire High School; Kristin Pelz, Assistant Principal-Cheshire High School; Maureen Reed, Ed.D., Assistant Principal-Cheshire High School; Daniel Tartarelli, Assistant Principal-Cheshire High School; Stephen Trifone, Athletic Director-Cheshire High School; Michael Woods, Principal-Dodd Middle School; John Perosino, Assistant Principal-Dodd Middle School; Katharine Carlucci, Assistant Principal-Chapman and Norton Schools; Kimberly Dessert, Principal-Darcey School; Amy O'Brien, Principal-Doolittle School; Kristin Lopa, Assistant Principal-Doolittle School; Kelly Grillo, Principal-Norton School; Scott Jeffrey, Principal-Highland Elementary School; Erica Bordonaro-Assistant Principal-Highland Elementary School; Kevin Hanlon, K-8 Curriculum Coordinator; Christina Sherwood, Supervisor of Elementary Special Education; Marie Broadway, Supervisor of Secondary Special Education

Public access was made available through live streaming the Cheshire Public School's 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

None

3. PRESENTATION

A. SUPERINTENDENT'S PROPOSED 2022/23 BUDGET.

Chairman Perugini called on Superintendent Solan to present his budget recommendation. Dr. Solan began by thanking Mr. Masciana, his staff, central office staff and administrators for their part in the preparation of this budget.

He reviewed Board Members' responsibility to provide an appropriate learning environment for all students, which includes (1) adequate instructional books, supplies, materials, equipment, staffing, facilities, and technology, (2) equitable allocation of resources among its schools, (3) proper maintenance of facilities, and (4) a safe school setting. He next reviewed the Superintendent's responsibility to collaborate with district leaders to design a fiscally responsible budget that ensures equitable and developmentally appropriate educational experiences between schools, provide a safe and clean learning environment, fulfills statutory obligations, and allows for the advancement of Board of Education goals.

The Superintendent reviewed how our district goals center around social emotional learning and complex thinking, noting that there has never been a time where those goals have been more critical. The Superintendent reviewed factors that affect our budget. Internally, student enrollment is climbing, while externally the major factor is the global pandemic.

Over the last six years, the average budget increase has been 1.51% per year. He said they have done a great job, as a school system, by focusing on what's most important, which has allowed us to continue to strive and make great gains while managing a rather competitive, fiscally tight budget. The 2020/2021, Per Pupil Expenditure for Cheshire is \$18,156, compared to the State average of \$20,707 per student.

Dr. Solan said that enrollment is a key driver in this budget. During the last ten years, there has been a decline in enrollment, but the forecast for the next ten years shows a steep growth based on birth rates that we received from New England School Development Council. Our Pre-K to Grade 12 enrollment projection for this year was 4,052. On October 1, we were at 4,145, which is nearly 100 more students than were projected for the year. The projection for next year is 4,150, but we are almost to that number already. We know that the birth rates are increasing, and it is not far-fetched for us to exceed 4,150 by a big stretch, not only because of birth rates, for we have actual data for, but because of significant building development that is occurring within our community.

The other key driver in our budget is Medical Benefits. During last year's budget process, the Town Council reduced our operating budget by \$1.5 million and then infused \$1.5 million of federal money into the medical benefits account to stabilize tax growth. Currently, our reserve contains 1.73 months of claims. We like it to be at the least, between 1.5 and 3 months in reserve. Our budget, as presented tonight, infuses another \$1.5 million, which covers future claim projections. The Superintendent said he wants it to be clear that that money does not do anything to the reserve. If the claims come in exactly as we have them budgeted at the end of next year, our reserve would still be 1.73 months. The budget increase does nothing to bolster that reserve. The Superintendent said they

are working with the Town to unify a protocol around medical benefits management. The Finance Committee of the Town Council is discussing this. The Superintendent stressed again that climbing enrollment and medical benefits are the key drivers in this budget.

Dr. Solan said they started this process by soliciting feedback from the educators in our school district, which funnels up to our administrative team who makes the recommendations and requests. At the end of that process, even tempering those requests, we were at a 7.62 percent budget increase. He said he did not feel that was a financially responsible budget, but under the circumstances, with growing enrollment and our unprecedented pandemic, he did not want to cut services, so the choice was to maintain services as is. He shared his recommended budget as follows:

2021-22 Budget	\$77,001,052
2022-2023 Recommendation	\$81,114,420
<i>Medical Benefit Increase</i>	\$ 2,235,633
All other Increases	\$ 1,877,735
Total Increase	\$ 4,113,368
Total Increase Percentage	5.34%

Dr. Solan noted that the budget increase without benefits would be 2.44%. The Medical Benefits increase accounts for 54.3% of the overall budget increase. The Teachers’ contractual salary increase of 1.23%, and several new positions to accommodate the enrollment increase, accounts for 26.2% of the overall budget increase. Building Maintenance/Repair is 2.4% of the increase. Increases by category:

- Salaries – 3.02%
- Benefits – 17.60%
- Maintenance – 4.70%
- Instructional Expense – 1.06%
- Support Services – 2.33%.

The average elementary class size is 18.7 students this year, and projected to be 18.9 students next year, as predicated on enrollment projections. The Grade 7 class size is projected to be 26.3. Dr. Solan said they would be watching this number and making adjustments if necessary.

The recommended net staffing changes are as follows:

- + 1 Elementary Teacher at Chapman, Norton and Highland Schools
- + .5 Elementary Music Teacher

- + .5 Birth to Three Teacher
- + 1 Secondary Coordinator/Evaluation for the Transition Program at QU

The recommended elementary staffing increase is due the significant increase in elementary student population (actual and projected) for the 2022-23 school year. The transition program position is due to a change in the interpretation of law extending special education services from the age of 21 to the age of 22, essentially increasing our enrollment by 33% in that program.

Next, the Superintendent explained that the 2022/2023 projected revenue is \$10,465,684. He noted that the Town Council takes this revenue into consideration when finalizing our budget because the money is sent directly to them. We also have COVID-19 Grant Funding. While the primary goal and planned use of the funding for the ESSER II and ARP ESSER grants is to address student learning loss needs, this funding can and will be used to address health and safety requirements related to the pandemic as needed. In the current 2021/2022 school year, we unfortunately have incurred unanticipated costs due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic. Those costs total approximately \$300,000 through December of which \$180,000 was for the rental of tents in the fall at all schools and \$120,000 is for the continuation of intra-day cleaning in all our schools.

The Superintendent reviewed the district's accolades and noted that an investment in our school system is an investment in Cheshire.

Dr. Solan reviewed the key takeaways of this presentation:

- This budget is driven by climbing enrollment and medical benefits costs representing 55% of our budget increase.
- We are recommending funding benefits at the projected rate as a strategy employed in concert with the Town of Cheshire.
- The remaining 45% of our budget increase is grounded in preserving current service levels.
- Cheshire Public Schools is an outstanding value for our community providing exceptional results, while spending \$5,007,800 less than the DRG B average on a per pupil basis.
- COVID-19 is still a real factor as we support students who have had their life dramatically impacted over the last 2+ years.

Superintendent Solan reviewed the upcoming budget meetings noting that the first one will be held virtually and the public and view the live stream on our YouTube channel.

Chairman Perugini thanked the Superintendent for his presentation. He said he appreciates that he is being financially responsible, but sees that we are not advancing. He asked if in the budget workshops, the Superintendent and show some ways in which

we can advance. Dr. Solan thanked Mr. Perugini for asking that question and said he will highlight some “what if” areas for the Board to review.

Ms. Harrigan thanked the administrators for attending this evening and for their work on this budget recommendation. She said she agrees with Mr. Perugini that as a school district, we always need to be thinking about how we are going to advance our educational objectives. She would also like to see some of those “what if” items in priority order.

Dr. Solan said he would like to clarify, that “advance” is not the right choice of language. We have made tremendous advances in the last two years during COVID. Ironically, the jargon that is used for what we are doing is called acceleration. Our staff, our teachers, and our administrative team have spent a lot of time working on advancing our school system and this is why we have been successful during the pandemic. He said that maybe the correct term is “enhancement.” He will work with his administrators and compile a prioritized list.

Mr. Grippo thanked Dr. Solan and his staff. He said it is frustrating to see that we are still having a problem with the Medical Benefit Trust Fund and he hopes that we will be able to work with the Town to come up with a solution. He asked the Superintendent if there was anything included in the budget for more training for teachers or for purchases of additional technology to bolster what we already have. Dr. Solan answered Mr. Masciana is going to elaborate on this during the budget review.

Mr. Martelli and Ms. Ham also thanked the Superintendent and his staff. Ms. Ham said she is stumped by, and angry about the Medical Benefits budget amount. She would like to understand why we continue to come up short every month. Dr. Solan explained that they have been pursuing a uniform process and management of the Medical Benefits account with the Town. He said this increase is not because of a dramatic increase in our medical claims, but rather a calculated decision to smooth tax rates last year. We need to have a long-term strategy in place. Dr. Solan reported that our USI representative will be at the meeting on Tuesday, and he will be able to provide some greater insight for everybody about where we are with respect to the claims process.

Ms. Rosenberg noted that we are adding many positions and asked for the roles and responsibilities justifying what those positions are covering and how they would alleviate some of the workload from existing teachers or staff. Dr. Solan answered, that the first three positions are classroom teacher positions at the elementary schools to address enrollment. The fourth position is a half-time music teacher, again, connected to the enrollment. The next half-time position is a Birth to Three teacher needed due to a demand for those services in our community. We are one of the few districts, maybe the only district, that is a State-contracted Birth to Three service provider. We realize that those students with the most intensive needs in our community can only benefit tremendously from this service. We provide the service and invoice the State for services. We will recoup that money based on the demand and the services provided.

The last position is for the Coordinator/Evaluator for the Transition program. The State extended special education services from the age of 21 to the age of 22, so now we have that many more students engaged in that process. Our PPS Director will be giving a presentation about the Special Education element of the budget, which is a significant portion of our budget.

Mr. White asked if the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) formula we get from the State incorporates the number of students in our district. Dr. Solan said they will be discussing this in more detail during the budget review process, but it is not necessarily a student-count formula. Regarding Medical Benefits, Mr. White asked if there is anything that could be provided that relates to other towns in similar situations, to serve as a benchmark. Mr. Masciana answered that every plan is going to be different but he will check with our representative who represents other towns. He said we have not been funding our expected claims level. Last year, we funded \$800,000 a month or so, but we knew our claims expectation was \$900,000. Part of the \$2.2 million gap is because we underfunded the last year. We have to make that up this year, plus the expected increase in actual claims. He said they would be discussing this in detail on Tuesday evening.

Ms. Rosenberg said she was hoping to see more staff that would impact students on Dr. Solan's "what if" list. She said there was learning loss and asked what we are doing to provide additional services and support to accelerate our students. Dr. Solan responded that he would send Ms. Rosenberg the "Bounce Forward" plan from last year.

There being no more discussion, Chairman Perugini reviewed the upcoming meeting schedule.

4. **ADJOURNMENT**

On a motion by Ms. Ham and seconded by Ms. Rosenberg, the meeting was adjourned at 8:41 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Anthony Perugini, Board Chair

Attest:

Carol K. Jesensky, Board of Education Clerk

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