

**MINUTES OF CHESHIRE BOARD OF EDUCATION
BUDGET PRESENTATION MEETING HELD IN
TOWN COUNCIL CHAMBERS ON JANUARY 8, 2026 AT 7:30 PM**

Board Members Present: Samantha Rosenberg, Chair; Anne Harrigan, Vice Chair; Tim White, Secretary; Matthew Colehour, Anne Marie Cullinan; Mark Ecke; Heather Fitzgerald

Board Members Absent: None

Administrators Present: Jeffrey F. Solan, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools; Marlene Silano, Assistant Superintendent of Schools; Emily Taylor, Chief Operating Officer; Robin-Anne Carey, Director, Pupil Personnel Services; Vincent Masciana, Chief Project Officer; Kevin Hanlon, 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; John Perosino, Athletic Director, Cheshire High School; Kelly Grillo, Principal, Dodd Middle School; Ryan Murphy, Assistant Principal, Dodd Middle School; Diana Burns, Ed.D., Principal, Chapman Elementary School; Katharine Carlucci, Assistant Principal, Chapman & Norton Elementary Schools; Kristin Lopa, Principal, Doolittle School; Jillian Romann, Assistant Principal, Doolittle School; Jodie Roden, Principal, Norton School; Scott Jeffrey, Principal, Highland Elementary School; Erica Labickas, Assistant Principal, Highland Elementary School; Azra Redzic, PK-8 Curriculum Coordinator; Christina Sherwood, Supervisor of Elementary Special Education; Marie Broadway, Supervisor of Secondary Special Education

1. CALL TO ORDER – 7:32 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.
Ms. Rosenberg led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

2. AUDIENCE

None.

3. PRESENTATIONS

A. Superintendent's Proposed 2026/2027 Budget

Dr. Solan began by thanking staff and administrators for the extensive, collaborative work that went into developing the budget, noting it was the result of months of deliberation led by the Finance office and district leadership. He said the budget is fiscally responsible and aligned with board goals, serving an

anticipated 4,482 students through not only instruction but also mental health, medical, nutrition, special education, transportation, and extracurricular services.

All budget decisions were filtered through the priorities of complex thinking and social-emotional learning. Key contextual factors included significant enrollment growth—approximately 225 students, largely in grades K–6, \$1.2 million increase for special education needs, and the need to replace a one-time \$250,000 operating carryover from the prior year. External pressures such as wage increases, inflation, benefits, state and federal mandates, and uncertainty around grant funding were also highlighted, along with the broader challenge of supporting students in a rapidly changing educational and technological environment.

Dr. Solan noted significant residential development, particularly on the north end of town, noting both increased housing and a younger population, with Cheshire experiencing the second-highest youth population growth among similarly sized Connecticut towns since 2019. Internal cost drivers were outlined, including a new teacher contract with an overall cost increase of 4.46%, higher non-certified wage growth to remain compliant with minimum wage laws, rising medical benefit costs, increased square footage despite school consolidation, vendor contract adjustments, and temporary carrying costs for vacant buildings.

The superintendent reviewed staffing and programmatic priorities, including maintaining class size ratios, addressing rising middle school enrollment, reallocating staff due to redistricting, and selectively advancing positions such as a STEM curriculum coordinator while deferring others to remain fiscally responsible. Dr. Solan noted Cheshire ranked 122nd out of 165 Connecticut school districts in per pupil expenditures.

The initial *internal* budget request was 10.56%, but that was not fiscally responsible, so they worked to get that number down to 8.83%, a total increase of \$8,226,443.

The budget proposes significant certified staffing changes driven by redistricting and enrollment growth. At the elementary level, seven teachers are being added overall, though specific building allocations will shift based on the waiver process: Barnum will gain seven teachers, Norton will gain nine, while Doolittle will lose two and Highland will lose seven. Two transition kindergarten positions at Darcey will be eliminated and those staff members reassigned to K-6 classrooms. Despite adding seven elementary teachers, the average class size will only decrease from 19.0 to 18.7 students per teacher—the current ratio of 19.0 is the highest the district has seen in over a decade. The budget also includes 2.5 unified arts positions (art, music, and PE) to serve the additional elementary class

sections and one special education teacher to address the needs of the 225+ additional students.

Dr. Solan highlighted three key administrative positions under consideration. The budget includes a STEM Curriculum Coordinator at \$135,000 (salary and benefits), a position that was in last year's budget but ultimately cut during Town Council review. The budget also includes an elementary assistant principal position at Barnum for \$165,000. A building maintainer II (skilled trades person) is included to support the advanced HVAC systems in the new buildings, given the 9% increase in square footage. The budget also accounts for replacing a specialized transportation van used for the transition program's work-study assignments at a cost of \$100,000, which will be funded through the state SEED grant.

The superintendent expressed particular concern about middle school class sizes, noting that eighth-grade class sizes at Dodd Middle School are projected at 25.9 students per class for next year—described as "very high" and not where the district wants to be. He acknowledged his history with middle school cafeteria duty makes this issue especially concerning. The budget does not include two additional middle school teachers that would cost \$340,000, but Dr. Solan emphasized that middle school enrollment is growing from 698 to 790 next year and will continue to climb. He indicated that over the next two years, the district will need to add four middle school teachers and suggested it might make sense to add two now to "soften the slope" rather than facing a steeper staffing increase later. He called this potential addition the item most in need of board discussion and community input.

Several positions requested internally were not advanced in the recommended budget as part of the effort to maintain fiscal responsibility. These include a humanities curriculum coordinator (deprioritized in favor of the STEM coordinator given the shifts in science and math standards), a 4-year-old special education classroom that the district believes it can navigate without, an additional building maintainer II position, and an additional grounds person. Dr. Solan noted that the transition kindergarten program will be discontinued after two years of operation—it was created when the state changed the birth date requirement from January 1 to September 1 and was intended as a two-year bridge program. The district operated it on a tuition basis as a budget-neutral program but now feels the community has been well-served and it's appropriate to discontinue it.

The Superintendent reviewed that Medical Benefits represent one of the fastest-growing areas of the budget, having doubled over the past decade. The current monthly claim rate is approximately \$1.2 million, projected to increase to \$1.3 million next month, for a total increase of 6.92%. This funding does not enhance

the reserve balance but simply maintains it at current levels. The superintendent noted the district currently has 2.02 months of claims in reserve as of the end of November (December data not yet available), which is safely within the recommended two-to-three-month range. For most of the previous year, the reserve floated below two months, so the current position represents improvement. The budget increase is purely driven by projected claims, and the actual reserve balance will depend on claims that occur over the next year, which no one can control.

Dr. Solan presented detailed breakdowns, showing 60% of the budget dedicated to salaries and 20% to employee benefits. Support services including transportation account for 9% of the budget, instructional expenses including special education represent 6%, and maintenance and operations consume 5%. Of the total budget increase, 50% is dedicated to staff salaries (including new certified positions and contractual increases for all staff), 15% to benefits, 14% to support services including the transportation contract and additional buses needed for redistricting, 15% to instructional expenses, and 6% to maintenance. The \$700,000 increase in special education outplacement represents 10% of the overall budget increase.

Regarding class sizes, the superintendent provided detailed historical analysis of class sizes. At the elementary level, the district currently has 119 teachers serving 2,263 students for an average of 19 students per teacher. With the addition of seven teachers and projected enrollment of 2,363 students, the average will move to only 18.7 students per teacher. This minimal improvement is concerning because 19 students per teacher is already the highest elementary average the district has seen in over 10 years. Class sizes tend to be lower in early primary grades and higher in fifth and sixth grades, but the overall average has been "creeping higher over the years" as the metaphorical vice has been tightening. At the middle school level, average class sizes have also crept up over the past eight years, with the current and projected ratio representing the highest in recent history.

Next, the Superintendent reviewed Revenue Sources and State Funding. The district's revenue sources remain essentially flat. Education Cost Sharing (ECS) funding stands at approximately \$9.5 million, a number that has remained in that vicinity since 1989. The Special Education Excess Cost Grant, designed to reimburse districts for costs exceeding 3.5 times the per pupil expenditure (approximately \$70,000 per student), has never been fully funded by federal or state government. The state uses a block grant approach where all municipalities report their excess costs and the available funds are proportionally distributed based on need factors, leaving districts well short of their statutory allotment. The district did see a modest increase in this grant this year, but it remains significantly underfunded. Dr. Solan identified full funding of the Excess Cost

Grant as a critical priority for the community, even more so than restructuring ECS.

When compared to DRG B communities, Cheshire ranks in the bottom third to bottom quarter in spending at \$20,815 per pupil. However, the district ranks 8th in the state for academic performance. This comparison demonstrates that Cheshire schools represent "a tremendous value" to the community, delivering top-tier performance with below-average spending.

Dr. Solan presented the district's record of achievement and recognition to illustrate the value provided to the community. The district maintains superior achievement compared to other Connecticut schools, which translates to some of the best achievements in America. Cheshire schools have earned Schools of Distinction designation and are annually recognized as a top community for music. The district regularly wins the CIAC Michaels Cup and has National Special Olympics Champion Schools. The Best Buddies chapter has been recognized as among the best in both Connecticut and America. The preschool program is nationally accredited, and 98% of upperclassmen take dual enrollment or career preparation classes. At Cheshire High School, more than 93% of students participate in arts, athletics, clubs, and activities. Dr. Solan emphasized the importance of providing growth opportunities beyond the classroom.

The Superintendent walked board members through the budget book, directing the viewing audience to access the complete PDF on the Cheshire Public Schools website under the Board of Education section. He highlighted the book's organization, noting that each account section begins with an explanation of what's included in that account, followed by historical graphs showing trends over the past 20 years, and detailed line-item breakdowns.

Dr. Solan addressed a frequently asked question about retirement savings, explaining the economics have changed significantly. A decade ago, when he became superintendent, the district could typically count on teachers retiring at top step (for example, \$100,000) and hiring new teachers right out of college at entry level (\$50,000), creating \$50,000 in savings per position. However, there is now a real shortage of teachers coming out of college. The district's retirement history for both teachers and administrators from 2000 through 2024-25 is documented in the budget book for transparency.

The superintendent acknowledged the district did not "wake up with a new problem or new challenge today" but rather has seen the vice tightening over the past few years. The district has been stretched daily to utilize resources effectively to achieve strong results, and this will continue. He expressed serious concern entering this budget year knowing the fiscal realities that exist across Connecticut combined with the circumstances facing Cheshire Public Schools specifically.

Dr. Solan provided an update on the redistricting waiver process, noting that all staffing numbers presented use the "B2" enrollment projections but are subject to refinement based on waiver outcomes. The district is currently in the middle of priority legacy waivers (Phase 1), having sent options to approximately 135 families. As of the presentation date, 104 families had already responded, with slightly more than 50% opting to stay in their assigned school and slightly less than 50% choosing to move. The superintendent anticipated completing Phase 1 by early the following week and hoped to start Phase 2 (general waivers) a week early, potentially by the Monday after the presentation. Earlier completion of the waiver process allows for more accurate staffing projections, knowing where students are going determines where staff should be assigned. While the staffing numbers by building may shift slightly based on final waiver results, the overall ratios will remain roughly the same, with perhaps one teacher difference at most if all factors align perfectly.

The budget includes additional transportation costs related to redistricting, requiring one or possibly two additional buses to serve the new routing patterns discussed during the start time and redistricting conversations. A specialized transportation van used for the transition program must be replaced at a cost of approximately \$100,000. This van is used to transport students in the transition program to their work-study assignments. The district previously contracted this service at great cost until a teacher obtained a special license to drive the van, dramatically dropping transportation costs. However, the van is now dying and must be replaced. The administrative team, particularly Robin Carey, identified that this vehicle qualifies for purchase through the state SEED grant, making it an acceptable purchase that will ensure students get to their work-study assignments while saving significant money compared to contracted services.

Following the superintendent's presentation, Board Chair Rosenberg opened the floor for clarifying questions from board members. She noted that this was an opportunity for broad topic questions and clarification, with more detailed review to follow at subsequent meetings.

Mr. White requested clarification on the transportation van costs. Dr. Solan apologized for any confusion and explained there are actually two vans being considered. The first van is a \$100,000 replacement vehicle needed for transportation that will remain in the operating budget. The second van, which is specially accommodated in a different way, costs \$60,000 and is also needed. However, the district received a SEED grant from the state that will cover the cost of the \$60,000 van, allowing it to be backed out of the operating budget.

Ms. Rosenberg asked Dr. Solan to walk through the budget request process for the benefit of new board members, explaining how requests move from building level

to central office and how everything gets compiled. Dr. Solan explained this is essentially a year-long process that begins in the fall at the building level with extensive dialog between administration and community members at each school. Principals then submit requests to central office. Concurrent with that building-level work, central office examines all other budget elements not necessarily principal-related. There is a review of all current contracts, determining where employees are on the salary schedule and what the roll-up projections look like. The team goes through recent utility information and projections, compiles all existing contracts, and ultimately meets individually with building-level administrators to have them walk through their different requests and rationale.

There was conversation regarding staffing, the STEM Coordinator position, and the State Insurance Program, all of which will be discussed during the Budget Review process.

Ms. Rosenberg asked whether Dr. Solan had received any knowledge of early retirements yet, noting he knows the superintendent keeps an eye on this issue. Dr. Solan responded they are early in the season and unfortunately have a couple of retirements due to health reasons along with some other retirements. At this point, he only has a couple of confirmed retirements.

Ms. Cullinan raised a question regarding special education. She noted that at the previous day's legislative breakfast, they heard that legislation passed last year includes some relief for districts. Dr. Solan explained the SEED grant was something they had heard about very early in the fall, but the district only received that information about two weeks ago. Ms. Carey participated in a call the previous week to learn more details. Dr. Solan expressed hope that by the end of January, the money promised in August and September would be accessible and he hopes to use it to purchase the van that is sorely needed. Regarding the excess cost grant, he tried to impart to the state representatives present that this issue is twofold. When the district spends in excess of \$70,000 on a student, that student probably has very significant needs, and oftentimes those needs extend beyond the resources available to effectively provide for them in the community, requiring outplacement. Simply reimbursing districts for all money spent beyond \$70,000 only addresses half of the equation—if there's no "governor on top pushing down the costs that have gotten to be astronomical at the outplacement," the district is "only feeding the beast."

Ms. Cullinan followed up, noting that she thought she had read at the end of the last legislative session that there is now, or will be, a cap on out-of-district placement tuition, and asked if there was any information on that yet. Ms. Carey responded that the district is just beginning to receive information on what tuition costs will be for the next school year, and many providers are increasing costs by 5%—described as "a huge difference." Ms. Carey noted the average cost per

outplacement next year is projected to be \$140,000, up 5% from the previous year. Dr. Solan clarified this is before transportation costs, which are in addition to tuition. He also explained what Ms. Cullinan might be referencing—the state is now only accrediting certain outplacement providers and will only reimburse districts if they send students to an accredited provider. This represents the state's attempt to eliminate less reputable providers by indicating they won't provide reimbursement for placements at non-accredited facilities.

4. ADJOURNMENT

On a motion by Mr. White, and seconded by Mr. Colehour, the meeting was adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Samantha Rosenberg, Board Chair

Attest:

Carol K. Jesensky, Board of Education Clerk

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