

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in special session on Wednesday, March 1, 2023 at 5:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board members present: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy (by phone), Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mrs. Roy (arrived late)

Board members absent: Mr. Stone

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance, Mr. Brough, Human Resource Specialist, Mr. Pietrasko, Director of Infrastructure and Security Technology, Mrs. Quarato, Learner-Centered Specialist and Mrs. Siegel, Learner-Centered Specialist

Mrs. Petrella called the work session to order at 5:02 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mr. Moore, to approve the agenda, as presented.

In favor of approving the agenda, as presented: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella and Mr. Roraback. Motion carried.

2023-2024 Budget Discussion

Mrs. Neubig reported that she received an email from the state partnership plan about health insurance rates and they believe the correct budget increase should be 7.1 percent and she has incorporated that into the budget. That brings the total increase down to a 4.21 percent gross and 4.96 percent net, with a reduction of about \$143,000. Electricity has also lowered the supplies line item.

Dr. Schuch also asked Mrs. Neubig to talk about capital and she explained that the capital budget includes both capital reserve and equipment. There is an increase of \$148,000 over last year or 12.16 percent. Capital and equipment make up .39 percent of the 4.21 percent increase. Included in that is the capital reserve at 2 percent of the \$39 million budget (about \$778,000). Last year, the district had budgeted at roughly 1.84 percent. Also included is a new dishwasher for food service at Coginchaug (\$14,000), basketball shot clocks that are required by the CIAC (\$7,000), high jump and vault covers (\$5,000), defibrillators (\$4,000), music keyboards (\$3,500) and software renewals. The total is \$1.365 million.

Turf replacement requires an additional \$80,000 to finish up and they hope to replace the turf in 2023. Mrs. Neubig hopes to reallocate the culvert grant funds to Pickett Lane paving phase 2 which will require a vote from the board. They believe the paving will be about \$700,000 for this phase and only about \$300,000 will need to be saved. The chiller and chill pumps at Strong are listed at \$243,000 which is not enough, but is a start. Variable frequency drives are now a priority item. Mrs. Neubig has included unanticipated building and maintenance at \$100,000 which is what it was last year. They will also have to look at the boiler and chiller pumps at Coginchaug next year.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if they can hold off on the turf replacement and allocate the \$80,000 to unanticipated. Mrs. Neubig explained that they can certainly do that after sending a down payment to the vendor. That will hold the price until 2024, but the \$80,000 will then have to go into the next budget. Mrs. Dahlheimer was concerned about issues coming up in different buildings and repairs at Lyman. Mrs. Neubig explained that some repairs are budgeted, but she wasn't sure if the \$100,000 would be enough if something comes up. She did believe that they could live with \$100,000.

Mrs. Neubig added that the town allocations would now be reduced by \$92,000 for Durham and \$50,000 for Middlefield with the two recent reductions.

Dr. Schuch reminded everyone that the board made a commitment to save 2 percent for capital each year and he hoped to get the next phase of Pickett Lane done. Mrs. Neubig added that they will also have the contingency left from the bond as well.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that there were a number of items that the board needs to revisit. They have now received course enrollments for this year. Dr. Darcy was pleasantly surprised by the numbers, but felt that the math and science numbers appear low. She did not feel that other classes are absurdly low. Dr. Darcy felt that some math and science teacher loads are pretty low, but that could be remedied by collapsing some of the levels. She wasn't sure that doing that would be appropriate for next year. She also acknowledged that AP classes are small everywhere.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked why SAT prep is not being offered in 2023-2024 and Dr. Schuch will get her that answer. She also noted that they received the class offerings between tech and music. Total cost for K-12 music program in the proposed budget is \$657,266, not including extra-duty stipends. Total cost for 6-12 technology program is \$265,937, which includes woodworking, robotics and coding, but does not include stipends. Tech ed at the K-5 level is budgeted at \$155,520. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that the district is disproportionate in what is being offered between music and technology. She is a little concerned about the offerings mostly at the middle school level. She then reviewed that technology and innovation is a one-quarter class that is required and one enrichment class is offered for one quarter per year and is required in grade six. Mrs. Dahlheimer asked why that was only offered at the grade six level. Open Studio is optional in grades six through eight and Mrs. Dahlheimer also did not believe that the STEM and robotics club are running this year.

At the high school level, Mrs. Dahlheimer asked about EMT training under technology as she felt that was a science elective. Photography has always been an art elective, not technology. She added that when those are removed, the district is incredibly disproportionate in technology to music. When she looked at the FTEs, she felt that there are two music and band teachers at every school. Mr. Brough explained that the music staff at Brewster is 0.8 and 1.0 at Lyman, 1.2 at Memorial, 2 at Strong and 2 at the high school.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked the administration to look at both technology and music to see if there were any reductions possible in FTEs and taken out of the budget or restructured so that it is proportionate between the two programs. Mrs. Quarato added that the STEM club is running and enrichment in grade six falls in the rotation with their language classes. Mrs. Petrella added that she felt that the enrichment teacher was supposed to be available for more than one grade and not just for certain students. Mr. Moore felt that the position was created to begin a Talented and Gifted program for the entire school. Mr. Brough added that the enrichment teacher works with kids from grades six through eight. She works in collaboration with a

regular education teacher and self-contained settings as well. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that the position was like a modified coach and Mr. Brough agreed, but added that she also works with kids in their areas of interest.

Ms. Betty asked about enrichment at the elementary schools and explained that her child has told her that enrichment is like having extra library or extra art time. Mr. Brough thought that the enrichment teacher does work with the fifth grade, but it is more of a challenge in the elementary grades. Ms. Betty would like to see more offered because they are doing four classes of music a week.

Mrs. Neubig compared the budgets for the last three years and found that the music budget did increase based on contractual obligations and the vacancy factor. There were also some equipment purchases in 2022-2023 that were not needed in 2023-2024. They did decrease a tech ed staff member last year when staff cuts were made, going from a total of six to 4.2 FTE district-wide. Grants have also been used in the past to purchase lumber, equipment and robotics competition fees. Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if money allocated to tech ed rolls over to next year's budget and Mrs. Neubig explained that general fund money never rolls over to the next year, but becomes fund balance used to balance future budgets.

Mrs. Caramanello verified that the district no longer has a STEAM coordinator. Dr. Schuch felt that the role of the STEAM coordinator had perhaps evolved into something it was not originally designed for. He felt that their role was more of tech support, with a heavy emphasis on testing. They also did a lot of work for the former Director of Curriculum. Dr. Schuch did not see a lot of evidence of actual in-school STEAM support, especially at the secondary level. He added that the pandemic also changed the role of the STEAM coordinator to some extent.

Mrs. Caramanello explained that, prior to the pandemic, that person would send specific grade-level ideas for STEAM projects weekly, if not daily. She would take the science units and add to them. People also came in to physically model programs in the classrooms. Mrs. Caramanello felt that the STEAM coordinator was very beneficial to the district. Mr. Moore added that she became a critical role during COVID to put together the technology that was needed and was basically taken out of her tech role.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if the stipend positions that were created in order to have outdoor ed and STEM are sufficient to do more than just planning. Mrs. Petrella asked if the enrollment numbers are typically in the teens at high schools. Dr. Schuch's experience was with higher numbers, but his district wasn't as well-funded as it is here. He agreed that high school classes do have lower enrollment than elementary levels. Mrs. Quarato felt that the larger the district is, the larger the class size is especially at the high school level. Mrs. Siegel added that that happens at the high school level due to the number of courses offered.

Mrs. Petrella asked about the size of the current freshman class and Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that there were 75 freshmen, but that has increased a bit since the beginning of the school year. For 2023-2024, there are 103 students in eighth grade, with 20 of them already having applied to other schools. Mrs. Petrella asked how these numbers will affect the class sizes and Dr. Schuch felt it would make the numbers even smaller, but they will know better at the next work session.

Dr. Schuch asked if the board was asking for the administration to not offer everything that is currently being offered in music. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that she would be more looking to increase technology. She does not want to affect programming, but if the programming is disproportionate between the two,

that would be something to look at. Dr. Schuch asked if they were looking for a recommendation that may change the budget to achieve that, even if it is an increase. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that they could look at that analysis as well. Mrs. Petrella would not want programming eliminated, but maybe have it restructured to offer the same things in different ways. Dr. Schuch reviewed that chorus is now mandatory in grades three, four and five, becoming an elective in sixth grade. Band starts as an elective in fourth grade. General music is also required.

Dr. Darcy felt that it is a real balancing act between electives offered and class size in small districts. She felt that there will be times when high school students have to prioritize and decisions will have to be made. She did feel that there were probably some electives that could be let go. As far as music, Dr. Darcy found it fascinating that chorus is mandatory. She also felt that if students are in band, they shouldn't be in a general music class but then general music classes will be filled with kids who are not interested in music. She felt that the curriculum could be changed to make those classes more engaging. Dr. Darcy felt that there is a tendency to let schedules drive curriculum and it would behoove the district to figure that out.

Dr. Schuch agreed about the schedule challenges, primarily at the elementary level, around all of the related arts. He explained that general music classes are generally at the level of regular classes, but chorus includes the entire grade level. This gives grade level teachers time to collaborate and do professional learning. Dr. Schuch believed that this is how chorus has been done in the district for a long time and more staff would be required in the elementary grades if it were not mandatory because teachers would need to be available for them to do something else.

Mr. Moore added that music has been a leading character of this district. Mrs. Dahlheimer found that concerning because the district is not a music academy. Mr. Moore explained that it has been a mainstay of the district for decades. Ms. Betty felt that they needed to look into it. Her daughter is shy and hates chorus, but is forced to do it. She is pulled out of class for instrumental and misses math every week. Ms. Betty felt that her daughter lost a good two years and is only in fourth grade. She has four classes per week in music, but one tech class and three science classes.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt it was wonderful that the kids start with music at a young age and keep going, but asked how many kids lose their passion very young because it is not being offered. As a parent, she felt that band is perceived to be mandatory, whether it is or not. The district also has a large special needs population that cannot participate in band or it is out of their comfort zone. Dr. Darcy explained that education has honored the extrovert for decades and kids who are introverted don't have the same opportunities. Technology would be one of those places.

Mrs. Petrella felt that the board is putting a lot of effort into moving into learner-centered education and that will be a major shift. She didn't feel they should make these changes while they are gradually shifting to learner-centered education. Mrs. Caramanello how Mrs. Petrella knew that it would be a gradual shift to learner-centered.

Mrs. Caramanello felt that music is a very important program, but many students are not part of that program. She agreed that more offerings need to be available for those students. She felt that the incoming freshman class would be a great place to start to see how to make those classes more concise. Mrs. Dahlheimer also felt that they are clearly not keeping kids in the district by offering more music. Mr. Moore added that the last two or three valedictorians were all in the music program. Mr. Roraback

stated that there are a lot of opportunities outside of school for those students as well. He is also a big supporter of the music program, but acknowledges that it is not for everybody.

Mrs. Dahlheimer would like to see how many kids were not able to continue with band in fourth grade when COVID hit and whether they are currently in band in seventh grade. Dr. Darcy added that she would not want anyone to panic and that they are not talking about broadly eliminating music and are more just looking at ways to optimize learning time and balance electives. Mrs. Dahlheimer mentioned robotics at the high school had only eight kids and Mrs. Quarato explained that that is due to the materials that are available. Dr. Schuch reviewed that Mrs. Stone and Mrs. Trainer have now set minimum numbers for class sizes in electives. Teachers will now do active recruiting for those classes. Mrs. Dahlheimer would like to know how many kids signed up for robotics but were unable to do it. She would also like to know if any students were unable to take music courses that they wanted. She felt that they cannot run a program that doesn't have the materials to support the kids that are passionate about that.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked to look at the Coordinator of Student Affairs position at Strong. She reviewed that they were told that the coordinator is engaging with every sixth-grade parent and she doesn't believe that to be true. Mrs. Dahlheimer wasn't sure that an assistant principal position is appropriate at the middle school with the current enrollment. She went through the job description of the Coordinator of Student Affairs and thought that the duties are or could be covered by others. Mrs. Dahlheimer stressed that the individual is amazing, but the role itself may not be appropriate. Mrs. Caramanello also felt that a lot of that job description was the reason for hiring an SRO.

Mrs. Dahlheimer also felt that they need to talk about increasing interventionists and questioned if coaches could possibly do some one-on-one or small group work with students. She also felt that similar districts are seeing increases in their budgets as well. Mrs. Neubig noted that the total average of districts reporting to the state is a 3.61 percent increase, but average for regional districts is 6.44 percent. The total average for the DRG is 4.83 percent.

Mr. Mennone felt that they will be in a different position once they are able to close schools. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that Wallingford just made the decision to combine their two high schools and that is a much longer process in a regional district. She felt that they need to advocate for the small towns that are not getting the state funding.

Mr. Moore asked about school lunches and Mrs. Neubig stated that lunches are free until the end of June, but there is a house bill to have lunch be free after that with an intent to target higher need communities. For RSD 13, we may need to add that into our budget. No movement has been made on it as far as she knows. She estimated approximately \$355,000 or 1% budget increase.

Mrs. Dahlheimer would also like to look at possible Central Office reductions. Mrs. Caramanello added that she strongly feels that the district needs a Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that would be a hard conversation to have in the current space. She agreed that it was hard to know that they are not writing curriculum and they don't know where they will go with it. She suggested having some conversations on March 22nd.

Dr. Schuch asked to what extent the board believes that it is primarily his responsibility to organize the district and execute the work. He reviewed that they made some moves, with the support of the board,

and it may now be that they want to go in a different direction. He felt that some of these issues are budget, but others are more structural and programmatic. Mrs. Petrella felt that it was important to remember that the Board of Education is responsible for student achievement and most of these issues affect student achievement.

Adjournment

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to adjourn the special meeting of the Board of Education.

In favor of adjourning the special meeting of the Board of Education: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mrs. Roy. Motion carried.

Meeting was adjourned at 7:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First