

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education met in regular session on Wednesday, March 22, 2023 at 5:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

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

Board members absent: None

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance, Mrs. Keane, Director of Student Services and Special Education, 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 5:03 PM.

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Ms. Betty, to amend the agenda to include item 4C and move C to D, with that being a possible vote on budget adjustments and changes.

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

Mrs. Dahlheimer then made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to approve the agenda, as amended.

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

Public Comment - at the beginning of the meeting public comment should refer to items on the agenda

A. In-person public comment

None.

B. Remote public comment

None.

2023-2024 Budget Discussion

A. Staff updates regarding programming, class sizes and other related topics

Dr. Schuch explained that he has asked Deb Stone, Cheryl Gonzalez and Tom Ford to give updates. Before that, Mrs. Neubig had some proposed adjustments. Mrs. Neubig reported that the electricity supply line has been reduced (\$96,000) due to the new supplier. There was also a slight increase in supplies for Strong School at \$10,000, which produced a net decrease of \$86,000. These changes brought the gross budget down to a 3.98 percent increase and the net budget down to a 4.72 percent increase. That is a .23 percent drop since the last meeting and .61 percent since the first budget meeting.

Mrs. Stone reported that they have shared some course selection information with the board. Because of contract negotiations with the teachers, they eliminated team leaders being able to teach one less period. They had been operating at about a 1.0 overage (about five classes) which they have been able to reduce to .8. The one overage that remains is in French because there is only one French teacher at the high school. There has also been a .6 reduction in math due to a retirement. Mrs. Stone reported that the leadership team met and looked at course requests. There might be a minimal cost savings to be found, but they do need to be sure they have enough classes. Unless the board is comfortable raising class sizes to historic levels, maybe even double what they are now, the cost savings would not be great enough to eliminate another FTE in the core areas.

Dr. Schuch reiterated that they could take an existing full-time position and make it a .8 through combining A and B level classes, but they do not believe that is a best practice because that individual would probably choose to resign. There may be educational reasons to still do that next Fall. Mrs. Stone explained that there are a lot of good reasons to do that, but she wants to be sure they do it appropriately and with teacher knowledge.

Dr. Darcy thanked Mrs. Stone for doing all of that math and explained that it is incumbent upon them as a board to ask these kinds of questions. Mrs. Stone added that it has made them start to look at things a little differently. Mr. Roraback recognized that enrollment numbers are always fluid and students move in and out, but asked when they will have a solid number. Mrs. Stone explained that students can apply out of district any time in the Fall before their freshman year. In most cases, they need to commit around March 1st with a deposit, but that doesn't mean they have to go there. Mrs. Stone reviewed the elective selection process and explained that counselors meet with the students as well. Mr. Roraback asked when the master schedule is started and Mrs. Stone stated that they are waiting for the board's decision. Mrs. Keane added that the master schedule also affects the entire district for special ed support and sharing of any staff.

Mrs. Gonzalez reported that their goal at Strong is to create more offerings for students with the same staff by way of scheduling. The related arts staff will each be able to offer a second course. Courses are due to Mrs. Gonzalez by March 31st and her goal is to send them out to students after the April break for them to sign up. Those courses will run against music, but the students will also have the option for tutorial as well, and they will run a quarter at a time. Students will have the option in any quarter to take an extra art, a PE, a TI or a health class. In addition, Mrs. LaRosa will run four different Maker Space courses. In order to run these additional classes, they have made a request for \$10,000 in supplies. Dr. Schuch thanked Mrs. Gonzalez and her team for making that vision into a reality. They are simply offering more for all of the children, with no additional staff and no decrease in music offerings. Mrs. Gonzalez is also considering changing the name of tutorial to study hall. She also recognized that there may be some scheduling issues. The related arts classes will run by quarter and music will continue to be year-long classes.

Mrs. Gonzalez explained that the teachers are very excited about these extra classes and will figure out the best way to use the additional \$10,000. Mrs. Dahlheimer was concerned that that wasn't enough money. Mrs. Gonzalez felt that they could use whatever they could get. Mrs. Dahlheimer suggested Unified Sports as a PE elective.

Mr. Ford then reported that they did brainstorming at the elementary level around the mandatory chorus conversation. They want to provide a choral opportunity, but looked to be sure there were STEAM and tech opportunities as well. They are looking at not having required chorus for third, fourth and fifth grade and to embed that into the general music curriculum instead. In lieu of chorus, they would shift to more discipline-specific enrichment and SEL offerings. Those could include music, art, PE, library and technology. Scheduling would vary, based on staff members and individual classrooms.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if any of the enrichment would be affected by the 1.0 reduction in art. Mr. Ford did not feel that would have any impact and it can be accomplished with the staffing that they have. Mr. Ford confirmed that there will still be choral performances for grades three through five. Mr. Roraback asked how students will choose and Mr. Ford explained that they will not be choosing and it will be part of a regular schedule. Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if it will be a 50/50 split between enrichment and SEL and Mr. Ford explained that they will try to do that but it will likely vary a little bit. It will also be consistent across all three elementary schools. These enrichment periods will be once a week.

Mrs. Durkin explained that chorus would not be a standalone class at Memorial and they will still have an enrichment block. Mr. Ford stated that it will not really change the schedules at Lyman or Brewster. Mr. Roraback asked if the chorus teachers feel there might be a dilution of the program and if instruments will still be taught. Mr. Ford noted that that has always been an optional part of the music program and no changes are proposed. He added that there may be some other ways to accommodate the really motivated choral performers with voluntary choral times and other things. Mrs. Siegel added that moving choral standards into a music block that already has standards, there will probably be less time for something.

Dr. Schuch summarized that they had hoped to make more reductions, but they do feel that they are going to be able to offer much more to more children. He hoped that the board understands that they are drawing down the number of overall sections at the high school, but that doesn't necessarily equate to FTEs.

Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that teachers that are non-related arts at Strong are currently teaching a tutorial. She asked if they are also going to be teaching these new courses. Mrs. Gonzalez explained that a tutorial is a duty, not a course so it could likely be replaced with another duty but people will be needed to cover any tutorials. Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if the timing of the schedule will change and Mrs. Gonzalez noted that it will not. Mrs. Stone commented that they think the high school schedule will be the same as well. Mrs. Dahlheimer assumed that tutorials would then have to be covered by core subject teachers and Mrs. Gonzalez agreed that that would have to be. Currently, teachers teach five classes in their core subject, have prep time and can be assigned duties.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if there was an update about a possible reduction in Central Office support staff and Dr. Schuch stated that they have no recommendations for Central Office reductions as it would diminish their ability to support what is done in the district. He stated that the entire leadership team has

looked at that and they are aware that people may believe Central Office staff should be reduced, but his position is that they are the ones doing the day-to-day work and keep the organization going.

Mrs. Caramanello reiterated that she would like to see a switch from the four learner-centered positions and felt that it is very irresponsible. She would rather see one Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment. She felt that one person needs to be solely focused on the curriculum, assessment and student achievement. Mrs. Caramanello has brought this up several times and just feels that the time, effort and money that has been spent on learner-centered is taking away from many of the more imperative things that need to be addressed. She requested that this be looked at in this budget as it doesn't seem like this will come to fruition any time soon.

Ms. Betty agreed and also asked for that in the budget document. She also felt that the district should potentially go back to that model. Ms. Betty also noted that Central Office is budgeted for 15.7 FTEs and is currently at 17.7. Mrs. Neubig explained that the Learner-Centered Specialists are now considered Central Office and Mr. Brough agreed. Ms. Betty added that support personnel is budgeted at 111.5 and they are at 113.5.

Dr. Darcy agreed that curriculum, instruction and assessment doesn't currently have the kind of attention that it did, but she didn't care what the position is called but does want to see how the tasks have been divided. She does believe it is more than a one-person job, but would like a clear delineation of supervision of the curriculum.

Mrs. Petrella agreed but also wants to see the results of those positions. She believes that is the piece that is missing. She didn't believe that the learner-centered idea is the issue, but the fact that it has been two years now and they haven't seen things happening in the classrooms. Mrs. Roy agreed and noted that if the board doesn't fully understand, it would be impossible to expect the community to understand.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that the direction that the strategic plan is moving in is not the direction the board would like. Short-term goals would be filled by the Director of Curriculum and Instruction model, but her concern is that the job descriptions are very heavy on learner-centered practices while continuing existing district operations. She reviewed that the focus is on learner-centered practices and it is important for the board to realize that the framework is already present in the district. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that a Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment can bring it all together and would be a lot easier than the current direction. She noted that she would not be looking to reduce positions and it would not have any budget impact.

Mr. Roraback would like to see language in job descriptions that put a direct correlation between responsibilities and student achievement. He felt that the per pupil expenditure is a never-ending battle and he believed that the community would pay the price but want the learners to be the best prepared that they can be. Mr. Roraback believed that the per pupil number is just not valid until they can better utilize the space.

Mr. Mennone felt that the changes proposed are the only way they are going to be successful and the board needs to be on the same page with that. Mrs. Petrella stated that they have been looking at making student-centered more intense for two years now with staffing, meetings and action teams. She wondered what they will see in September that relates to all of this work. Mrs. Petrella recognized that there will be

a transition and there are already a number of practices in place that are student-centered, but would want to know how those will be expanded come September. Looking at the job description for the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, the second responsibility is to ensure that curriculum revisions are consistent with the initiatives of the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan is to move more toward student-centered learning. Since the resurrection of the Achievement committee, they have pushed more on that.

Mr. Moore asked if Mrs. Neubig had the final cost of Pickett Lane and she stated that they are reviewing the bids, but it is just under \$700,000 and the carryover from the culvert will just cover that.

Mrs. Neubig explained that the 2.0 FTE in Central Office is the Learner-Centered Specialists, with one coming from the Administrative line and one from the STEAM coordinator line. They had also added a special ed teacher at Strong and there was a .4 ELL and a .2 library media.

Mrs. Neubig then reviewed capital was increased by \$148,000, which is funding the capital reserve at 2 percent. Requests include a new dishwasher at Coginchaug, basketball shot clocks that are required by the CIAC, outdoor track high jump and vault covers, \$4,000 for new defibrillators, \$3,500 for keyboards at the high school and software renewals. As far as the 2 percent capital reserve, that is budgeted at a total of \$778,000 and includes \$80,000 for turf replacement, \$100,000 for unanticipated building equipment and maintenance, \$300,000 for Pickett Lane paving phase 2 with the transfer of the culvert grant, \$243,000 for chiller and chiller pumps at Strong and indoor air variable frequency drives.

B. Updates on budgets from other districts

Mrs. Neubig did research, not only through CASBO but also on district websites. She explained that each of the budgets is in a various stage, some already approved, some just presented and some going through a town council. She has looked at 50 districts and out of those, the average was a 4.97 percent increase. There were 11 regional districts and the average was a 4.1 percent increase. In DRG C, one district was very high at 14.97 percent so the average is 7.13 percent. The 50 districts included surrounding towns, regional districts and DRG C.

Mrs. Dahlheimer also went through DRG C budgets and saw a trend of increasing budgets as well. There has been a lot of talk about denials of grants, declining enrollments and extra square footage. A lot of money is going to capital for aging buildings and new projects are having a hard time moving forward. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that they want to reduce the budget as much as they can, but also need to understand that the district does not get what a lot of other districts get and the per pupil is extremely high. She felt that it all goes back to that they need to reduce the square footage in the district in order to sustain the district, the programming, the buildings, the offerings, the kids and the good staff. Mr. Roraback added that they don't want to just sustain, but to improve programming for the students.

Mrs. Neubig reviewed that the most recent reduction in the budget since the first proposal in February amounts to \$230,000. That estimates out to a change in the per pupil expenditure of \$191. This current proposed budget equals an estimated per pupil expenditure of \$27,616. Mrs. Neubig explained that a reduction of about \$1.5 million would reduce the per pupil expenditure by \$1,000.

C. Possible Vote on Budget Adjustments or Changes

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Caramanello, to remove the two Learner-Centered Specialist positions to shift to a line item for a Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment.

Mr. Moore wasn't sure this was a budget issue but rather a management/administrative issue. Dr. Darcy asked if this kind of a decision was within the board's purview or more for the superintendent. Mrs. Dahlheimer understood Mr. Moore's and Dr. Darcy's points of view, but felt it was a gray area that would fall under both a policy change and a budget issue. These two positions are currently 12-month positions. Mr. Mennone felt that it should be more about approving the direction they want to go in and then aligning the positions with that.

Dr. Schuch asked the board if they believe the way the district is organized is under the purview of the superintendent or the board. He felt that that power is usually vested in the chief executive which is the superintendent in this district. He asked the board to consider how that would speak to the board's role in organizing the district. He felt that part of his contract is to set that up and execute it, by delegation through the leadership team. Dr. Schuch has also heard that the direction that the board wants to go is not the direction in the current Strategic Plan. It is the board's purview to change the Strategic Plan, but he has not known the board to do that at all. It has also been referenced that the board has short-term goals that are not being addressed, but Dr. Schuch has not seen those short-term goals. He has been asking since October for a list of measurable outcomes targets.

Dr. Schuch reviewed that the board adopted the Strategic Plan, but he felt that it is his responsibility to implement that plan. That plan was adopted last June and it hasn't even been a year yet. In terms of the organization, reconfiguring around the Director of Curriculum was proposed and the board supported that. They are not even one year into that model and the board is questioning the wisdom of it. He added that, with respect, he hasn't heard a good reason why. Dr. Schuch added that to insinuate that these folks are not committed to the current work of the district by being focused on future work is a complete misrepresentation. He argued that they are more productive and effective than they have been in a long time. In summary, Dr. Schuch felt that there was a big disconnect here and he wanted to make sure the board has all the information they need. He also reviewed that the union contract is also aligned with the Strategic Plan. He felt it would be very disruptive to the quality work that the district is doing to make this change now. Dr. Schuch added that both Mrs. Quarato and Mrs. Siegel recognize the problems that go along with them having the same job titles.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that while there was an adoption of two pages of the Strategic Plan in order to start things moving, the full Strategic Plan has not been adopted. They have yet to do measurable outcomes and have yet to see competencies. Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that the short-term goals were given to Dr. Schuch. Dr. Schuch interpreted that to mean what the HR Committee gave him as a list of things to be accomplished about a month ago. He is used to seeing that type of work in a Strategic Plan or in a publicly-discussed goal document to then be executed by the superintendent and staff. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that there was some push-back that the goals needed to align with the Strategic Plan and that had yet to be worked through.

Dr. Schuch realized that his background in strategic planning is different than others, but part of the organizational model that he subscribes to is that the Strategic Plan is passed at a high level like the board

did here and then the staff is trusted to execute it. He respectfully disagreed that there isn't a plan and they aren't executing it. Dr. Schuch added that anything that is transformational can't be rushed. Again, Dr. Schuch asked if the board trusts him and the leadership team to execute down the pathway or do they feel like they need to be more hands-on and involved in it. Dr. Schuch reiterated that the Strategic Plan was adopted 10-0, but Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that they only voted on two pages. He agreed, but added there were also descriptions of six strategies. Mrs. Dahlheimer was under the assumption that it was not the entire Strategic Plan.

Mrs. Petrella felt that this discussion doesn't have anything specifically to do with the budget, though it is a conversation that needs to happen. Mrs. Caramanello noted that the problem seems to be the wording and she would have a hard time adopting a budget that has learner-centered titles. She was willing to call the two positions Directors of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment as long as they know who is in charge of what. Mrs. Caramanello added that she has 100 percent trust in the administration. Dr. Schuch reiterated that Mrs. Quarato and Ms. Siegel are committed to both the present and future work of the district and he would want to keep the momentum moving forward and not hang the budget on it.

Dr. Schuch asked Mrs. Siegel to share the titles they were thinking about and she suggested either Associate Director or Co-Director of Learning Innovation or Learning Innovation and Accountability and Assessment or Learning Innovation and Development. They felt that the Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment title is a little older and, in many districts, that is Director of Teaching and Learning. Mrs. Caramanello liked the combination titles.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that the combination titles reflect where they are and when they are looking to go. She then withdrew her motion and Mrs. Caramanello withdrew her second.

Mrs. Petrella reviewed that the board had brought up a number of issues and after hearing what the principals had to say tonight, she felt that the staff is listening to the board.

Ms. Betty reiterated that she has been hearing a lot from the public that they want to see cuts at Central Office. She would like to see if there was any way to cut there. Mrs. Neubig explained that a lot of the Central Office staff work under her and she doesn't see the workload decreasing. Instead, she sees staff working every minute of the day and a cut would decrease the level of service that is provided. Mr. Moore stated that there needs to be separation of functions within the finance department.

Dr. Schuch felt that the board is at a distinct disadvantage getting those types of comments as the board doesn't see what people are doing every day. He added that reducing Central Office has been a common theme in all the districts he has worked in. Dr. Schuch asked once again if the board trusts him and the leadership team to do their jobs.

Mr. Roraback asked if they are fortunate enough to see an increase in enrollment, would the current structure be good at that point. Mrs. Neubig stated that her department would absolutely be able to handle that. Dr. Schuch added that if enrollment grows enough, they might need more teachers but not in the central support role.

Mrs. Petrella noted that there are 50 pages of mandates, with many of them involving reports that someone will have to do. Mrs. Keane stated that she strongly agrees with everything Mrs. Neubig said. A decrease in Central Office staff would affect student servicing and programming.

Ms. Betty asked how enrichment will work in K-2 when Brewster will be down a related arts teacher. Mrs. Murray stated that she has done a mock schedule and can still fulfill an enrichment period for every grade level. Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that decreasing Central Office will come up at the public hearing and both Boards of Finance are asking for that. She also felt that the towns are going to want to see closer to a 3.75 percent increase. Mrs. Dahlheimer did not feel comfortable voting on the budget at this point in time.

Mr. Moore asked if they are going to schedule a public hearing and Mrs. Petrella stated that if they vote on the budget, they will then schedule the public hearing. She explained that they would still have time to schedule the hearing for April 5th if they wait until March 29th to vote, with the referendum on May 2nd. Mrs. Neubig added that it would take a \$90,000 reduction to get to the 3.75 percent increase.

D. Possible vote on proposed budget

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Petrella, to approve the 2023-2024 budget in the amount of \$39,426,575.

Mrs. Dahlheimer felt that they were close, but not close enough and she would rather see the vote held on March 29th to be sure it is a responsible budget. Mrs. Petrella wondered if they would ask for the increase to be around 3.75 percent.

Mr. Roraback asked to confirm that the dates would still work if they waited until March 29th and Mr. Moore added that they have amended the budget after a public hearing in the past. Mrs. Neubig stated that the vote to send it to public hearing cannot be any later than March 29th due to posting issues, but added that they can't control when the paper publishes. Mrs. Caramanello acknowledged that the administration really combs through the numbers and that it would take \$90,000 to move the increase to 3.75 percent. She felt that that will not happen unless they make major cuts which will affect students drastically. She felt that it would be a waste of time to prolong the vote. Mr. Roraback felt that the board's goal is to get a budget out and hopefully get it approved quickly. It becomes more difficult if it gets voted down.

Mrs. Petrella summarized that if they approve the budget now, they still have to hear what the public has to say and if they feel that the public is not happy, they can then make adjustments before it goes to referendum. Mrs. Neubig then explained that the \$90,000 reduction would result in a decrease of \$30,000 to Middlefield and \$60,000 to Durham. Dr. Schuch noted that the proposed budget does not cut AP programs at the high school, does not cut music programs and does not drastically increase class sizes.

In favor of approving the 2023-2024 budget in the amount of \$39,426,575: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Roy and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

Mrs. Dahlheimer then read the Warning of Public Hearing into the record, with the public hearing to be held on Wednesday, April 5, 2023 at 7:00 PM and made a motion to do so.

In favor of holding the public hearing on the 2023-2024 budget in the amount of \$39,426,575 on Wednesday, April 5, 2023 at 7:00 PM in the auditorium at Coginchaug Regional High School: Ms. Betty, Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, Mrs. Roy and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

Adjournment

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

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

Meeting was adjourned at 6:55 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First