

The Regional School District 13 Board of Education held a regular work session on Wednesday, March 6, 2024 at 6:00 PM in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Board members present: Mrs. Caramanello (remote), Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy (remote), Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback, and Mr. Stone.

Board members absent: Ms. Betty

Administration present: Dr. Schuch, Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. Neubig, Director of Finance, Mr. Brough, Human Resources Specialist, Mr. Pietrasko, Director of Infrastructure and Security Technology, and Mrs. Stone, Principal of Coginchaug Regional High School.

Mrs. Dahlheimer called the work session to order at 6:00 PM.

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Approval of Agenda

Mr. Stone made a motion, seconded by Mr. Mennone, to approve the agenda, as presented.

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

Public Comment

A. In-person public comment

Chuck Stengel, from Durham, explained that he is the vice chair of the Board of Finance but is speaking as an individual. Looking at pages 43-45 of the proposed budget, he implored the board to use a five-year rolling average to prevent increases in the allocations. On page 45, he noted that RSD13 has the highest average for regional school districts, highest average in DRG C and others. He felt that that was unsustainable. Back to page 43, Mr. Stengel found it strange that births in 2023-2024 and 2025-2026 are much lower than in 2024-2025. Lastly, on page 44, the class size is depicted for preK through 8 but nothing else. He asked what percent of the budget is certified staff, what percent of the certified staff serves grades 9-12, what the target ratio is for students to staff in grades 9-12 and why is that part of the presentation always blank. If those issues can be explained, he felt he could support the budget. Otherwise, he cannot.

B. Remote public comment

None.

2024-2025 Budget Discussion

Mrs. Neubig began by reviewing the questions that had been submitted. There had been a question about savings on the turf and Mrs. Neubig explained that they will not need the full \$130,000 that she had in the budget, but only \$25,000. That adjustment will need to be made, however she suggested that it stay in capital under Unanticipated Building Repairs and Maintenance. Mrs. Petrella asked what happens to money in Unanticipated Repairs if it is not spent and Mrs. Neubig explained that it remains there. Mrs. Dahlheimer reviewed that they had talked about Unified Sports last year and that they wanted to start moving it into the lower grade levels. That has been included in this year's budget with Unified

bowling district-wide this year. There were other questions about how robotics was being funded and that includes four competitions at the high school level, with three teams. The Strong robotics team had one competition this year and the proposed budget includes three. There were also questions on moving expenses and those are included in this year's budget.

Mr. Moore asked about the reduction in math electives and the pathway programs. He felt that they need to restore staff for higher level math. He was also concerned that Strong has a higher music budget than the high school but does realize the band director has moved to Strong. He felt that the investment in the music program is critical to the identity of the high school. Music and athletics are two things that bring families back to the high school and they need to be sure they are providing enough for that. He felt that the music department has an impact on attracting kids and keeping kids. He added that the size of the band at Strong is low and chorus is really low. Mr. Moore also noted that he couldn't find any music stipends in the budget. Mrs. Neubig stated the line item includes \$69,643 for stipends, which includes all high school level stipends other than athletics.

Dr. Schuch stated that there are quite a few stipends for music at the high school. Mrs. Stone explained that it has been really difficult getting kids back into music after COVID. They are working to reconnect kids with the high school's band director. The interest in band at the high school is higher than last year, so Mr. Fisher will probably have to teach two sections. They also hope to put STEM offerings in music. Their intent is to fill Mr. Fisher's schedule at the high school. Mr. Moore noted that his salary is still in the Strong budget. Dr. Schuch acknowledged that the master schedules at the high school are normally done after the budget is approved. Mrs. Stone will update the board about classes once the information is available.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked about electives and Mrs. Stone explained that they had the kids choose four primary classes and eight secondary classes. They just gave the teachers those packets this week so they can begin to talk about class sizes. She is hoping to not run classes that have less than 10 enrolled, though there will be exceptions.

Mrs. Stone added that the teachers' contract now allows each teacher to teach five classes, they need to start talking about electives, even in math. Math classes average 16 students though there was a new AP precalculus class with 29. The teacher was given the choice to split the class, but they chose to keep the 29 and maintain two tech ed classes. This was the first year this class was offered and double the amount of kids were eligible for it. It should just be juniors and maybe a few seniors. Mr. Moore asked if they will offer AP statistics as well and Mrs. Stone thought they were doing that this year. She added that they may need to look at an every-other-year schedule for some of these AP classes. If not, class sizes may be around five or seven. Dr. Schuch added that they have tried to put some onus on the teacher to recruit for the AP classes.

Mr. Moore asked if all freshmen take algebra and Mrs. Stone explained there is an integrated algebra class which teaches algebra I and II in three years. Some freshmen take algebra and others take geometry because they took algebra I in eighth grade. Mr. Moore would like to be sure that the math department is big enough and strong enough to meet the needs of the kids to get into college. Dr. Darcy also felt that the trajectory in math in changing from AP calculus being the end all-be all. Data science is becoming the preferred trajectory. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that she was at a CUBE meeting talking about math, engineering and the sciences and it was agreed that teachers and programs are not as robust as they used to be in these areas. She would not want to see kids get to their senior year without having what they

need. Mrs. Stone felt that professional development is important and the department is embracing that. Mrs. Dahlheimer added that they very rarely talk about intervention in the high school.

Mrs. Dahlheimer noted that the Finance committee would like to have one more budget workshop so they will meet on April 20th.

Dr. Schuch felt that they are in good shape with class sizes based on their recommendation for the proposed staffing level. They would be willing to add staff if the board wished to.

Mrs. Dahlheimer reviewed the discussion at the last meeting about track uniforms and the recommendation would be to move baseball out a year which would allow indoor track, outdoor track and cross country to be in this coming cycle at a cost of \$16,500. Baseball moving out a year frees up \$10,500 and another \$5,000 could be available from the supply line item.

Mrs. Dahlheimer made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Petrella, to remove \$5,000 from the equipment line item and put it towards the uniform budget for cross country, outdoor track and indoor track.

In favor of removing \$5,000 from the equipment line item and putting it towards the uniform budget for cross country, outdoor track and indoor track: Mrs. Dahlheimer, Mrs. Caramanella, Dr. Darcy, Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, Mr. Roraback and Mr. Stone. Motion carried.

Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that Mrs. Neubig had done an analysis of the debt service pay-off structure. Mrs. Neubig explained that this arose because of the \$6.9 million bonding that was received in 2022 with three years to spend 85 percent of it. There is \$2.4 million that was put in for Brewster mechanicals that has not been completed due to the potential school construction. The district received a premium on the sale from the bond purchase. This premium can be used as a contingency, can be given back or be used yearly to pay debt service. The district left the premium there as an unknown and has been earning interest. Debt service is dropping off in the upcoming year and the only remaining debt will be the \$6.9 million. Debt service will drop from 2024-2025 to 2025-2026 in the amount of \$344,000. Mrs. Neubig suggested using the bond premium in 2024-2025 which would lower the budget by .87 percent.

Mr. DelVecchio asked what any negatives would be to that strategy and Mrs. Neubig noted that they would no longer have the money to be able to spend it if any projects ran over. There is a bond contingency though which was built into the \$6.9 million. She didn't really see any cons to this strategy and noted this also helps get to the 85 percent. Dr. Schuch and Mrs. Neubig are both comfortable with this strategy and Mrs. Neubig reviewed that the proposed budget is at a 4.48 percent gross increase and a 3.82 percent net increase. This strategy would result in a 3.61 percent gross increase and a 2.91 percent net increase. Mrs. Neubig explained that gross is all of the expenditures and net is expenditures minus revenue. Net is lower this year because she isolated a surplus in a couple of accounts that can be applied to next year. The towns pay off the net budget. Dr. Schuch added that they would be happy to get a 2.91 percent net increase out to referendum.

Mrs. Neubig stated that the average increase with a superintendent-proposed budget is 5.03 and the Boards of Eds have reduced that to 4.81. Average of regional districts, with eight out of 15 reporting, is 3.83 superintendent-proposed and the Board of Eds have increased that to 5.36. Mrs. Dahlheimer and Mrs. Neubig both felt that was due to ESSER funds being used to fund staffing which District 13 has not done. Mrs. Dahlheimer also noted that she has heard Danbury will have a 20 percent budget increase this

year due to ESSER funds and Mr. Mennone added that Meriden is in the same boat. In DRG C, the superintendent's budget was 4.4 and BOE is 4.44.

Mr. Moore asked how much of the \$6.9 million was unexpended and Mrs. Neubig felt it was approximately \$4 million. She explained that some of that was culvert grant money that can be reallocated. Any project they do must have been listed in the bond issue. Mrs. Neubig added that the \$344,000 premium also includes interest. Barring any new debt, there will be no increase in the debt service line next year. Mrs. Dahlheimer stated that she has worked hard to engage both towns and has seen how tough this year will be for both of them.

Mrs. Neubig added that she received information today that the health insurance will go to 3 percent and it was budgeted at 5 percent. Each percent equals about \$50,000, so there is the potential to save \$100,000 should that happen. It will be finalized in April.

Dr. Schuch asked for consensus from the board on the debt service and it was generally felt that it would be a good idea to use the premium.

Mrs. Dahlheimer explained that she will invite the Finance committee to the meeting on April 20th.

In response to Mr. Stengel's public comment, Mrs. Neubig explained that \$5.1 million is certified staff at the high school which represents 12.5 percent of the budget. Strong is 9 percent and the elementary schools are 6.5 percent of the budget. There is no policy on high school class size which is why it isn't shown in the book. Dr. Schuch added that they had asked the high school to take a look at class sizes and the conclusion is that they are doing the best they can while continuing to offer the programs. Class sizes are much easier to capture at the younger grades. Mr. Roraback added that the board needs to provide an appealing environment knowing the number of choices a student can make from eighth grade on and trying to make it so they don't leave the district. Dr. Schuch added that the schedule at the high school has eight periods and teachers are contracted to teach five periods. He felt that there is a premium to doing that, but it is a worthwhile premium.

Chuck Stengel then asked for numbers from the prior year in summation for classes at the high school. Mrs. Neubig stated she could do that for future presentations, but didn't feel it should be part of the budget book as that is talking about the next year. Dr. Schuch added that the high school has had more staff reductions in the past few years than any other level. Mrs. Stone that average class sizes won't tell the same story as actual class sizes. Mrs. Dahlheimer did feel that they need to talk about that more. Mrs. Neubig added that the \$5.1 million also includes all of the stipends for athletics and after-school activities. The psychologist and instructional coaches are also included in that number. Mr. Stengel thanked them for the information.

Mr. Moore asked how many world languages are being offered and Mrs. Stone stated there was French and Spanish and their last Latin student is taking it on Virtual High School. Latin is no longer offered in seventh or eighth grade. Mrs. Stone is also able to offer the virtual options for other languages as well. There is an issue about how expensive it is with the add/drop date being very early and no money is refunded.

Mr. Roraback asked if they foresee greater revenue with the investment that was made in the field house and turf. Dr. Schuch felt they would once there are lights and bathrooms. Mrs. Neubig stated she would

brainstorm some ideas about marketing it.

Mrs. Dahlheimer asked if there was money budgeted for rental of lights and where that money would go once lights are installed. Mrs. Neubig stated that she has taken that money out of the budget, but they will have to rent them if they do not get installed. The project does seem to be on track.

Adjournment

Mrs. Petrella made a motion, seconded by Mr. Stone, to adjourn the regular work session.

In favor of adjourning the special work session: Mrs. Caramanello, Mrs. Dahlheimer, Dr. Darcy, Mr. DelVecchio, Mr. Mennone, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Petrella, and Mr. Roraback.

Meeting was adjourned at 7:10 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Waz

Debi Waz
Alwaz First