

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Ellington, Connecticut

Finance/Operations Committee Meeting Minutes

The special meeting of the Finance Committee met on Tuesday, January 26, 2021, at 6:00 p.m.

Attendees:

Board of Education Members: Ms. Liz Nord, Ms. Jennifer Dzen and Ms. Jennifer Mullin, Mr. Gary Blanchette, Ms. Kris Picard-Wambolt, Ms. Marcia Kupferschmid, Dr. Michael Young, Ms. Miriam Underwood

Administrative Team Members: Mr. Brian Greenleaf, Director of Finance and Operations; Dr. Scott Nicol, Superintendent; Ms. Jennifer Brown, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/Human Resources Coordinator; Mr. Brian Hendrickson, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction; Dr., Kristy LaPorte, Special Education Director; Ms. Melissa Haberern, Special Education Supervisor; Ms. Sara Spak, Special Education Supervisor and Ms. Megan Davis, Preschool Coordinator.

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order by Ms. Liz Nord at 6:00 p.m.

Agenda Items:

1. *Preschool Program Discussion*

Ms. Sara Spak presented the preschool programming and funding information for the last five years. School year 2013-2014 the district had four half day programs. The typical students were selected from a play group as typical role models for our special education preschool students. At that time we did not have School Readiness Grant funding and there were no options for Choice preschool students to be part of our preschool program. In 2020-2021, we have three half day programs, two full day programs at Windermere and two half day programs at Crystal Lake School with full time availability for our full time students with disabilities. We current have moved to a lottery system for placement of typical students which gives everyone an equal opportunity to get into the program.

This year the School Readiness Grant provides 8 full day slots and 4 half day slots between the two schools for a total of about \$60,000 per year.

Preschool enrollment is low due to COVID-19 this school year. The number of students for the 2019-2020 school year reflect the typical classroom sizes for preschool. Forty-eight typical students at Windermere and Crystal Lake School and 34 students with disabilities at Windermere and Crystal Lake School. The preschool lottery has opened and we are accepting candidates. The lottery will take place in March.

The School Readiness Grant is a state funded initiative administered by the Office of Early Childhood with the goal to provide access to quality early educational programs to preschool age children. The grant is based on a sliding fee scale and families are still required to pay a portion of the tuition. The family cost for the program is based on family income and family size. In order for daycare facilities or other preschool programs to receive School Readiness Grant funding, they need to be either NAEYC accredited or

going through the process of accreditation. Ellington is currently in the process to become accredited. Previously Somers and East Windsor were the only two accredited programs so Ellington slots were going to those programs. If the two districts did not have any Ellington students in attendance than those two towns would receive our grant funding for their students. We wanted to make sure that this grant was going to support families in our own community to provide a structured program to further help our students strive when they complete the preschool program and enter kindergarten.

NAEYC stands for the National Association for Education of Young Children. Ellington was previously accredited and we are seeking to be accredited again so we can continue to receive School Readiness Grant funding to assist our families. The accreditation process takes three years. The process entails enrollment, an application process, self-study along with candidacy. After the candidacy, we will have a site visit in both locations.

The tuition proposal for the preschool program is done on a three year basis, which means we will continue to increase the hourly rate by \$0.25 per hour for the next three years. With the increase, the overall projected tuition increase will be about \$10,000 per year. Our program is still much lower than surrounding private daycare/preschool programs. At this time we can have 14–16 students in each class.

Question was asked as to the various source funding for the preschool program. Mr. Greenleaf indicated that the preschool funding comes from various sources. The various funding sources are as follows: general funding, Choice Program funding streams, School Readiness Grant, and preschool tuition for typical student enrollment.

Motion was made to recommend the increase as proposed by the Early Education Team with an increase to \$6.50/hr. with a consecutive increase of \$6.75/hr. and \$7.00/hr for the next three years for preschool tuition.

1st. J. Dzen

2nd. J. Mullin

VOTE: Unanimous. The motion passed.

2. *Continued Discussion on 2021-2022 Budget*

Dr. Nicol discussed the recommendation to the Board of Education was a 3.38% increase in the overall budget for the 2021-2022 school year. The district feels that this is a fiscally responsible increase to our tax payers. Over the past six years of presenting budgets to the Board of Education and the Board of Finance the average decrease from the original proposal has been an average of 0.91%. In addition to that all of the referendums have passed which means the public is pleased with what the Board of Education is proposing from year to year.

At the Saturday workshop, the Board asked for creative ways to come up with reductions of the budget and still continue to maintain our programming. The Board of Education meetings on January 27 and February 3 will continue to discuss these proposals for reductions to the budget if needed.

One such reduction option consisted of restructuring the existing Library Media Specialist positions to reset and redefine the role along with gifted and talented, enrichment and technology integration. This will reduce the budget by \$183K and bring

the budget proposal down to 2.93%. During the process we want to make sure to include teachers, paraprofessionals, Administration and work through the Curriculum Committee. The Board of Education will evaluate this in the spring and look at the progress in the fall. The Gifted and Talented Program is the one item we currently do not have in place in the district. The first step in the process is to look at the general staffing models which were presented at the meeting. If the Finance Committee is in agreement, then the district will look into the logistics of the staffing model presented.

Dr. Nicol indicated to the Finance Committee that all of the employees that this proposal would impact were spoken to prior to this presentation. The proposed changes would be to cut the Gifted and Talented position in the budget and restructure it across two other positions. It would also reduce the K-8 Library Media Specialists by 1.6 FTE, including one vacant position, and 0.4 FTE from art.

With this proposal all of our programming will be maintained or enhanced and we will meet all contractual obligations. The only person that would not have any rights to a position would be the 0.4 art teacher.

Ms. Underwood asked about unemployment costs associated with a reduction in force. Mr. Greenleaf responded by stating that if the person was unable to find another position, the district would be responsible for unemployment benefits beginning on 7/1/21. If a person was offered a position, declined the position and voluntarily resigned we would not be responsible for benefits.

Ms. Nord asked why this is the direction that was proposed since the Administration and teachers are concerned about the classroom sizes. Dr. Nicol stated that the proposal will not impact classroom sizes. In the current budget proposal we have the possibility to collapse grade 3 at Center School and used that position in a hot spot if needed. Dr. Nicol indicated that the Board may decide that the Gifted and Talented Program is not a priority and would recommend a teacher instead. Some members had reservations and would not want any cuts if classroom sizes do increase.

Ms. Nord asked about the job description of a Library Media Specialist. Mr. Hendrickson states that a Library Media Specialist champions for tech integration, expert professional developers, expert in the curriculum over all disciplines and content areas, runs and manages the library with library management systems and make sure all periodicals are there for the students and staff. Additional responsibilities include co-teaching and co-planning and working on units with teachers.

Ms. Underwood discussed concerns regarding the projected enrollment for the K-2 program across all elementary schools. She believes that the focus should be on teachers for increased classroom sizes. She also feels that the highly qualified educated Library Media Specialists in each school is very important for staff and students.

Dr. Young asked if the paraprofessional have enough experience to perform digital engagement responsibilities that are part of a modern library/media center. Mr. Hendrickson indicated that everyone in the library/ media program really stepped up to the call and work with many of our silver learning students. Part of the process will be to work with and define expectations for Media Assistants and to get the training needed to bring them up to speed with the current technology.

Ms. Underwood wanted clarification on the current budget presented to the board with regards to health insurance increase of \$365,855 which was a budget increase of 9%. What would the district save if we came in at 5.44% instead of 9%? Mr. Greenleaf stated that for every percentage point the amount would drop by roughly \$50,000. Mr. Greenleaf indicated that the current medical carrier presented an increase of 19%. The district went out to bid and those bids came back with an increase of approximately 9%. Mr. Greenleaf will continue to negotiate with the new carrier in hopes of reducing rate increase further.

Ms. Underwood also asked about reorganization of students riding the buses. If this was done would it be possible to save on 1-2 buses per year? Mr. Greenleaf indicated that the savings per bus would be approximately \$60,000, however the board cut a bus last year that was not cut operationally due to COVID-19. This already has to be done moving forward.

Ms. Picard-Wambolt felt that the need for Gifted and Talented is a must. So much time is spent on the students that struggle, we also need to focus on the other end of the spectrum of our students that need enrichment. The community forum of parents are appreciative of the enrichment program that students are getting but they wanted more for the Gifted and Talented students than just enrichment programming within the classroom setting.

3. *2020-2021 Budget Discussion*

Mr. Greenleaf discussed the initial projection for the end of the year. We anticipate that the district will be in the black and we will not have to ask the town for additional appropriations. There are two factors that impact the amount in which we will be in the black. One being the ESSER round two grants: the CARES Act and the ESSER. We are still waiting on the final numbers. The final award for CT was 4 times the original relief so we anticipate the amount for Ellington for the second award would be about \$200,000. The intent is to spend these funds in the spring. If the end of the year projections are more favorable we may use these funds for summer enhancement. Food Service numbers are at a projected \$200,000 loss. The first month ran about \$60,000 - \$70,000 of this deficit since we were running the hybrid model. Our monthly deficit is significantly less since we are in person at this time. We are hopeful that the deficit will only be \$150,000 for the year once we get more accurate figures by the end of the week.

Dental Self Insurance funds have an excess. We are looking at possibly putting some of that dental self-insurance excess funding and moving the funds to the medical self-insurance fund as well.

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting.

1st. M. Underwood 2nd. J. Mullin

The meeting adjourned at 7:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Ms. Liz Nord, Finance Committee, Chair