

Board of Education Ellington, Connecticut

January 23, 2021

A special virtual meeting of the Ellington Board of Education was held on Saturday, January 23, 2021, at 9:00 a.m. via Google Meet.

Present were: Mr. Blanchette, Purcaro and Young; Ms. Dzen, Picard-Wambolt, Nord, Kupferschmid, Underwood, Mullin, Socha and Dr. Scott Nicol, Superintendent of Schools.

Administration present were: Mr. John Collins, Director of Technology; Mr. Brian Hendrickson, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction; Mr. Brian Greenleaf, Director of Finance and Operations; and Dr. Kristy LaPorte, Director of Special Services.

Also in attendance: Ms. Jennifer Brown, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/Human Resources Coordinator and Ayushman Choudury, Appointed Board of Education Student Representative.

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 a.m. by Mr. Purcaro, Chairman. (0:00:06)

Mr. Purcaro introduced those in attendance at the meeting and thanked Dr. Nicol and Mr. Greenleaf for the work in creating the proposed budget document. Additionally to all the administrators and staff that have spent countless hours meeting with teams and individual staff, department heads and supervisors who have contributed to the budget document. Mr. Purcaro acknowledged that the budget presented was a starting point, working as a Board collaboratively and making revisions as needed before presenting the budget to the Board of Finance.

AGENDA

2021-2022 BUDGET WORKSHOP

(0:00:57)

Dr. Nicol began by thanking the Board of Education members for their attendance at the first virtual presentation of the budget by the Superintendent. Dr. Nicol expressed his optimism towards the budget presentation and looked forward to working with Board

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members collaboratively to create a budget for the Town of Ellington to go to the May referendum.

Dr. Nicol explained that the process was a bit different this year due to the input of staff and principals, the budget presentation included more concise information. Additional meetings and detailed information will be available for the Board if questions arise.

(Timestamp 0:03:30)

Dr. Nicol began the Superintendent Proposed Budget presentation with schedule highlights which included the Introduction and Budget Numbers, Notable Accounts, and BOE & Guests Comments/Questions.

Dr. Nicol began by presenting the *Vision* of Ellington Public Schools which was to grow exceptional learners and leaders who are courageous, reflective and contributing citizens of the world, the *Mission* which was to create a culture of learning that challenged and inspired all students on their personalized journey and the core belief framework that overlaps the District Improvement Plan, Superintendent's Goals and School Improvement Plans. The three areas of focus remain to be high quality learning, efficient operations and social and emotional learning services. The Ellington Public School district has led a complex environment due to school choice, complex classrooms, stakeholder advocacy, school safety, mandates, growth and investment and additionally the uncertainty and challenges of Covid 19.

By the Numbers: (0:06:45)

2627	Number of Students
24.1%	Diversity
1.7%	English Language Learners
13.7%	Special Education Rate
17.6%	Free or Reduced Lunch Eligible

Per pupil spending in Ellington was shown as being one of the lowest from the surrounding towns with the cost per pupil was \$14,610.00. Per pupil spending versus student test scores were illustrated where Ellington was over the median for test scores and left of the median in per pupil spending which indicated lower spending per pupil. The Return on Investment Index (ROI Index = Per Pupil divided by Accountability Index) showed that Ellington had a higher education outcome for students at a lower cost.

2021-2022 Proposed Budget

(0:10:05)

\$41,987,223

Increase of \$1,371,187 or 3.38%

Dr. Nicol acknowledged this initial starting point for the proposed budget and conversations and discussions were necessary from elected town officials and the Board to create a budget that meets the needs of the district but also is fiscally responsible. The average adopted budget percentage over the years was shown as a mean of 2.97% increase. The major drivers in the budget included staff salaries, budgets, transportation and instructional costs. The staffing overview included proposed positions of a 1.0 FTE Gifted and Talented teacher, a 12 month administration assistant for Crystal Lake School, both from the General Fund, a Resident Teacher from the Choice Fund and an approved Human Resource Coordinator position from the General Fund. All positions proposed are for the Board's consideration. There was a justification presented for the Board's choice of proposed positions which included the Gifted and Talented teacher position (main focus on the Board) the unspecified elementary teacher position which would potentially reduce current class sizes and a Special Education Teacher position at Ellington Middle School as an increase may be required in the future. The Ellington student to staff ratio of 6.03 in comparison to surrounding school districts was described as lean but is the staffing model that Ellington school district has used for many years.

The following staffing requests were not included in the 2021-2022 proposed budget:

1. Special education teacher for Ellington Middle School
2. Unassigned Elementary Teacher
3. Athletic Director/Director of Health
4. Communications Specialist
5. Transportation & Safety Coordinator

The projected Pre-K - 12 student enrollment included data from NESDEC 2020 and NESDEC 2021 demonstrated significant changes that, as discussed at the recent Operation Committee meeting, would impact the Windermere project due to the enrollment changes projected. The Ellington Public Schools overall student enrollment project included updated changes of the return of both Silver students and home-schooled students. In addition, Dr. Nicol explained that the current projected enrollment for Center School's third grade for the 2021-2022 school included four teachers with an student average of 16.25 per class, in which one of those positions

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could be utilized to fill the unassigned elementary teacher position currently not included in the proposed 2021-2022 budget while maintaining a reasonable class size.

Dr. Young requested clarification regarding the Silver student option not included in the proposed budget. Dr. Nicol replied that there was a possibility that the State of Connecticut would not require a full distanced learning option for the 2021-2022 school year. However, this would be dependent on current health factors. Dr. Nicol continued by stating that there could be an option available, different than what was in place currently and that conversations would be necessary to decide what the distance learning model would look like. Dr. Young suggested that perhaps the Gifted and Talented teacher have within the job description and involvement in assisting Silver distance learning students. Dr. Nicol felt that a discussion with administration, teachers, and parents should occur to collaborate what the Gifted and Talented teacher job requirements would include; with possible instruction of Silver distance learning students if the need is present. Mr. Purcaro added that there may be a reduction in bus ridership that may reduce operation spending but there may be an increase in the budgetary needs in other areas of the proposed budget and additional details from Dr. Nicol would need to be provided.

Dr. Nicol stated that as a district it must be mindful of revenue generation during this current period. In the past, the district was successful in creating an increase of revenue to be reinvested into programming in schools. Generated revenue has dropped from the Choice program and Covid-19. Discussions will be required to determine the status of revenue, how to stabilize it, and how to appropriately increase it for the benefit of the school district.

The Projected Revenue highlighted the School Readiness program which previously benefited East Windsor students and now has been redirected towards Ellington students due to the work of Dr. Laporte and her team.

Dr. Nicol presented the state funding (town revenue) which indicated that the State of Connecticut adjusting the formula of how the Educational Cost Sharing Grant is calculated. In the past with the use of the older formula, the Town of Ellington received a reduced amount of funds. However, with the updated formula the town of Ellington for the 2021-2022 fiscal year may receive an increase of \$15,000.00 to \$50,000.00 based on the district's current demographic and needs. Mr. Purcaro commented that it was interesting that the State of Connecticut has since gone from a deficit situation to a surplus situation. More analysis would be necessary because the way one agency looks at the State's finances may differ from another agency therefore when coming to a decision more information would be required.

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Dr. Nicol continued his proposed budget presentation of Choice Enrollment. The funds received are based on the first of October numbers approved by the Board. The breakdown was as follows:

- Choice Enrollment from October 2019 was 89 students
- Choice Enrollment from February 2020 was 86 students
- Choice Enrollment from February 2020 was an additional 28 students
- Choice Enrollment from October 2020 was 90 students
- Current Choice Enrollment as of January 2021 was 86 students

Dr. Nicol stated the goal was to maintain an enrollment between 90-95, however Covid-19 impacted Choice enrollment. Choice enrollment must be declared in February of each year in order to meet the March deadline so further processes may be run through CREC. Ms. Picard-Wambolt inquired what the percentage was from the October 2020 number. Mr. Greenleaf replied that Ellington has received 3% or \$6,000.00 per pupil based on the current Choice enrollment of 86. Certainly the percentage could increase to 4% or \$8,000.00 per pupil, however would be dependent on total Choice enrollment.

Notable Accounts (0:38:25)

Mr. Greenleaf began with a description of the large drivers in the 2021-2022 proposed budget. They were as follows:

1. Salaries
2. Health Insurance
3. Operations
4. Special Services
5. Technology

Overall, there are 449 accounts where $\frac{2}{3}$ of all accounts have held steady or decreased and the next 113 accounts (equal to less than \$10,000.00) only equate to 12.81% of total budget increase. The top 10 accounts equate to 82% of increase in the proposed budget. A brief summary of the items not included in the the proposed 2021-2022 budget were:

- Staff which totaled \$456,000.00
- Equipment and Furniture which totaled \$115,524
- Programs and Supplies which totaled \$20,415.00

Salaries and Benefits was the largest driver where approximately 80% of the total proposed budget was due an increase of \$1,114,136.00 or 3.36%.

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Total Salaries were presented as follows:

- Certified Salaries differed by \$385,979.00 with 0.95% impact on proposed budget
- Non-Certified Salaries differed by \$280,084.00 with 0.69% impact on proposed budget
- Substitute Salaries differed by \$15,500.00 with 0.04% impact on proposed budget
- Other Compensation differed by \$66,718.00 with 0.16% impact on proposed budget

Total = \$748,281.00 with 1.84% impact on proposed budget

Mr. Greenleaf continued to explain that the certified accounts were lower this year due an increase offset by retirements, large number of lane changes for teachers (12 for 2020-2021, prior 3 year average was 6.33) and non-certified included new positions. Retirements per budget cycle have dropped significantly from last year to 4. Each retirement saved roughly \$30,000.00 on salary.

Benefits were presented as follows:

- Health insurance at 9% with a difference of \$392,839.00 and 0.97% impact on the proposed budget
- Dental Insurance at -12% with a difference of -\$26,984.00 and -0.07% impact on the proposed budget
- Retirement at 0%
- Unemployment at 0%

Total = \$365,855.00 with 0.90% impact on proposed budget

Mr. Greenleaf offered the Health Insurance information in more detail: (0:44:11)

	19-20	20-21	21-22
Health Insurance*		\$4,757,641.00	\$5,150,480.00
Dental Insurance		\$326,984.00	\$300,000.00
Life Insurance		\$40,000.00	\$40,000.00
Total	\$4,923,856.00	\$5,124,625.00	\$5,490,80.00

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Difference	-\$683	\$200,769.00	\$365,855.00
% Difference	-0.01%	4.08%	7.14%

* Total account offset by \$175,000.00 Open Choice Funding

Mr. Greenleaf explained that included in the proposed budget, health insurance held 9.0% premiums increase which was a 19% offer from the current provider. With the negotiated contractual agreements, there was a shift of who would be paying whether it was the employee or employer. Additionally, the outlook for high cost claimants had increased from 13 cases to 19 cases above \$50,000.00 which caused less costs above pooling point of \$150,000.00 possibly absorbed by the carrier.

The short term action regarding health insurance was currently out to RFP for both Fully Insured and Self Insured. The initial Fully Insured responses are in line with current budget, with an update at the Finance Committee meeting.

Mr Greenleaf highlighted the Dental Self Insurance plan which has 2 years experience, roughly set aside \$212,000.00 (~60%) and currently holding minus 12% in allocation rates plus an additional ~\$10,000.00 reduction. Mr. Greenleaf stated that a portion of funds from the dental reserve (\$212,000.00) to the Medical reserve was also being examined.

Mr. Purcaro questioned if the minus 12% in allocation rates would reduce both employee and employer costs, in which Mr. Greenleaf responded that 95% of claims are covered and there would be a small reduction in cost for each employee. Mr. Purcaro confirmed that employees would be paying less of their dental insurance and Mr. Greenleaf concurred.

Social Security and Retirement currently would not show an increase at this time. However, there was a direct correlation to salaries with social security and retirement due to the changing rate for CMERS which had projected an increase in upcoming years. A FICA alternative would be examined.

LAP and Workers' Compensation had a shared risk pool with the Town and the current increase came below expected budget. A modest increase of 0.38% or \$1,497.00 was included in the 2021-2022 proposed budget.

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In general, utilities were able to be reduced due to the complete payment of 2016 loans. Utilities are keeping all accounts on pace with costs and there was a one time saving due to reduced usage in 2019-2020 from the closure of schools for Covid-19.

Transportation costs have increased significantly and account for a \$165,153.00 or 6.77% additional need in the proposed budget. Regular education transportation account had a contractual increase of 5% due to year 5 of 5 on the current contract with First Student. Student services transportation increased due to the potential hiring of individualized transportation services.

Regular Education Outside Tuition showed a decrease of \$8,164.00 or 2.45% due to the reduction of students participating in vocational programs as well as a slight decrease in adult education. However there was an increase in Magnet Tuition account to offset increases, a re-assessed Adult Education fee of V.R.A.B.E and a partially offset by a larger grant for adult education.

Dr. LaPorte began her presentation of the Special Education Program Budget. (0:55:31)

Dr. LaPorte recognized Mrs. Melissa Haberen and Ms. Sara Spak for their hard work in ensuring programming in the district and supporting all students. The Special Education Program Budget had an increase of \$37,000.00 due to the changes in Magnet Special Education costs and the implementation of RULER (social and emotional learning program) in Spring 2021. Special Services Outside Tuition has decreased \$4,565.00 or 0.57% due to working within the district to ensure students can participate in schools within Ellington.

Tuition and transportation costs have been on target but is dependent on who may be moving into the district and what specific needs are required. Those variables include unpredictable out of district placements, several students potentially moving to outplacement, an increase in Magnet School Special Education and current budget did not represent total expenditures which was offset by Excess Cost grant. The implementations of all the special education programming has reduced costs. Dr. LaPorte expressed the long-term strategies which would maintain current programming, expand programming for high value areas (S.E.D and Autism), establish regional centers to tuition students into the district, and the current limitation was facilities usage.

Mr.Collins began his presentation of Technology Equipment. (0:59:58)

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Mr. Collins reported that there was a small increase in the Equipment account to cover additional Chromebooks for kindergarten students due to Covid-19. However the technology line item has plateaued for the replacement of Chromebooks. Mr. Collins explained that the district was in year 4 of implementing 1:1 Chromebook equipment to students, therefore when closure of schools occurred in March 2020, technology was well established in comparison to other districts. Due to Covid-19, there were several programs being utilized by the district and the need to continue resources and best practices during distance learning going forward. Mr. Collins had two areas of focus:

- Instructional programs that benefit teachers in providing top level instruction
- Backend programs which included maintaining Google Enterprise for functionality purposes for teachers and for monitoring services that notify of technology misuse

Questions (1:04:57)

Mr. Purcaro thanked the entire administrative team for their contributions in presenting the 2021-2022 proposed budget. Mr. Purcaro questioned if there were any line items that may be removed from the budget that would not have an impact on teaching and learning. Mr. Purcaro requested more detail into the student ridership on buses. Acknowledging that under the current contract a seat on a bus must be provided to each student in the district. However, even with the possible return of Silver students, that number is down from last year and at \$65,000.00 required for each bus to run is costly if the buses are nearly empty. Mr. Purcaro commended the reduction of dental insurance of becoming self-insured. Mr. Purcaro inquired if there could be a way to reduce the number of buses based on actual ridership. Mr. Purcaro requested a possible inquiry of a PPN - Preferred Provider Network for Workers' Compensation for another means to reduce costs. Mr. Purcaro lastly inquired about out of district Magnet School tuition increase for further explanation.

Mr. Greenleaf responded the decreased ridership resulted in the reduction of a bus based on last years' parent survey and will be reevaluated. Worker's compensation has been fully insured under CIRMA and the district currently relies on their network collaboration with the Town of Ellington. Regular education line items were flat and Magnet Special Education saw a sharp reduction however it was questionable if that would continue in the future, as costs may fluctuate depending on the return of homeschooled students or students returning to magnet schools or another provider. The Magnet Special Education increase proposed in the budget was due to a significant increase in CREC rates. Mr. Greeleaf would continue the discussion going forward.

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Dr. Nicol added that competing with magnet schools who offer creative programming that was not currently offered in Ellington and larger facilities was a challenge. However in continued discussions regarding the renovate to new Windermere building project, the possibilities of offering creative programming and larger space would be an option for those current Windermere districted students attending a magnet school of returning to the district. As well as the addition Gifted and Talented teacher position to the district.

Ms. Picard-Wambolt suggested that if there was a state mandate that required districts to offer a distanced learning model, designated teachers should be assigned to distance learning students rather than teachers instructing synchronously. Ms. Picard-Wambolt acknowledged that would require additional staffing. Ms. Picard-Wambolt stated she was in full support of the Gifted and Talented teacher position remaining in the proposed budget.

Ms. Nord commented that she would prefer to have the unassigned teacher at the elementary level remain in the proposed budget with possible Gifted and Talented curriculum as part of the position. Ms. Nord also inquired of the status of the Math Enrichment Program developed last year for students in Grades 5-8.

Mr. Hendrickson explained that the Math Enrichment program was affected by the impact of Covid-19. Currently Dr. Edward DePeau has been working with Grades 5-6 students with math enrichment, and at the middle school geometry enrichment program was available for 8th grade students.

Ms. Nord expressed that the unassigned teacher could be considered for the gifted and talented position if the need was present. Dr Nicol responded to the timing of allocating those positions.

Dr. Young commented on a possible correlation between the gifted and talented teacher position for academic enrichment and magnet school tuition. Dr. Nicol responded that a parent's decision to send a student to a magnet program/school was complex. A gifted and talented program would offer more unique programming, however that could not guarantee that students currently enrolled in a magnet program would return to the district. Dr. Young clarified if the district set expectations of the new gifted and talented teaching position could generate for the district would be beneficial. Mr. Purcaro agreed with both Dr. Nicol and Dr. Young, however, at this point the risk of not knowing all the variables was too great, but would continue discussions.

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Ms. Dzen questioned that with the decreased participation of VoAg students why did the cost of transportation increase. Additionally, Ms. Dzen asked for clarification about the 19% increase of insurance. The current insurance company stated the increase was due to overhead, however most companies overhead decreased significantly due to employees working remotely.

Mr. Greenleaf responded that the VoAg transportation included transportation to Cheney Tech and were unable to be reduced due to contractual increase. Insurance companies would not disclose if their overhead had decreased therefore the factors that contributed to the increase were claims, trend, and increase of Covid-19 claims/costs. Mr. Greenleaf concluded by stating that if becoming self-insured has more benefits then that approach would be investigated in more detail and be recommended.

Mr. Purcaro agreed with Ms. Dzen regarding the investigation of insurance companies would increase and would be in favor of the district becoming self-insured. Mr. Purcaro questioned if possibly lowering the threshold of high cost claims acknowledging that contract insurance negotiations were pending in which Mr. Greenleaf replied details would be forthcoming in future meetings.

Mr. Purcaro requested that Dr. Nicol and Board members look at current staff resources, not only certified staff but in other operational areas as well where the ratios are low and consider allocating resources if necessary. Dr. Nicol stated that he would investigate options and have them available for the next budget meeting.

Ms. Nord questioned Mr. Hendrickson if students who stayed home for kindergarten for the 2020-2021 school year would return to the district as a first grade student or a kindergarten student. Mr. Hendrickson responded by acknowledging it would be a decision on a case by case basis dependent if the student received homeschooling instruction or not. Mr. Greenleaf referenced pages 27-28 with enrollment assumptions for the 2021-2022 school year. Center School and Crystal Lake School kindergarten class sizes were slightly smaller whereas Windermere kindergarten class sizes were significantly smaller. There was anecdotal evidence that Windermere district kindergarten students were either homeschooled or in a private school offering kindergarten programming. Currently Windermere has three kindergarten teachers and the proposed budget included four teachers.

Mr. Blanchette questioned if the new Special Education teacher position at Ellington Middle School was included in the proposed budget. Dr. Nicol responded that currently

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it was not included in the proposed budget for 2021-2022, however, would need to be reevaluated as in the following year the need would increase at the middle school level.

Dr. Young commented that as the district becomes more fluent with technology, there would be a decrease in paper copies for homework and class instruction. Mr. Collins responded with the consolidation of copiers and printers would be a consideration and researched further in the future.

Mr. Purcaro echoed Dr. Young's comments and requested more investigation in the reduction of paper copies.

Ms. Picard-Wambolt questioned if the position of Director of Facilities would remain on the proposed 2021-2022 budget or would the position be a shared responsibility with the town of Ellington. Mr. Greenleaf acknowledged it as being part of the proposed budget but discussions were forthcoming with the Town.

Student Representative Mr. Choudhary addressed the Board with a mathematical discrepancy of enrollment totals in which Mr. Greenleaf would update.

Mr. Purcaro offered comments from a member of the Board of Selectmen, Mr. Doug Harding, in which he stated that as a town it has been a challenging time and appreciated the presentation of the proposed 2021-2022 budget. Mrs. Melinda Ferry commended those in the budget process and acknowledged the work involved.

Ms. Picard-Wambolt added to Mr. Choudhary's comments regarding the enrollment discrepancy and Mr. Greenleaf explained that the correct total for Windermere should be 681 students.

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 10:48am

1st. M. Young

2nd. K. Picard-Wambolt

VOTE: Unanimous. The motion passed.

Respectfully submitted,

Kris Picard Wambolt
Secretary