

**Wellesley Public Schools
School Committee Meeting
January 12, 2021
Remote Online Meeting**

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 pm. Those present included Chair Linda Chow, Vice Chair Melissa Martin, Secretary Catherine Mirick, members Sharon Gray and Jim Roberti; Superintendent David Lussier, Interim Assistant Superintendent Mike LaCava, Assistant Superintendent Cynthia Mahr; Director of Student Services Sarah Orlov; Director of Nursing Linda Corridan; Director of Human Resources Gayle McCracken; Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Dr. Charmie Curry; Director of Technology Kathy Dooley; and Student Advisory representative Rachel White.

Ms. Chow announced that the meeting is being held remotely and recorded by local media and broadcast live by Wellesley Media.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Kerry Bedard joined to state she is both grateful and concerned. She referenced a Parent Letter that was sent to the School Committee and Administration asking that the metrics be revisited. The letter was shared with the Board of Health on December 30 and they were very receptive. She had a few questions she hoped would be addressed regarding various aspects of revising the metrics.

Lina Musayev, of 26 Cedar St., is a Town Meeting member in Precinct E. She thanked the Administration for their hard work. She shared comments on the events at the nation's Capitol the previous week, namely that while many people were surprised, Wellesley residents of color were not surprised. She called attention to the District's goal of cultural proficiency and inclusiveness. While she saw it as a priority in writing, she didn't see any line items in the budget to showcase it as a priority. She commended DE&I Director Dr. Charmie Curry while noting the DE&I work is too much for one person.

SCHOOL COMMITTEE REPORTS

Ms. Mirick noted she and Ms. Chow attended the Upham PTO meeting. She thanked them for hosting and stated they had a nice discussion about what the School Committee is working on. Additionally, the Bates PTO meeting was to be held this coming Thursday night and she will be in attendance. The Policy Subcommittee met the previous week to discuss equal access language. They are continuing work on incorporating the new language into all relevant policies. Finally, she reminded the community there will be Office Hours Thursday, January 14th and at that time there was space available for sign up.

Ms. Chow noted there will be a joint PTO/PTSO mtg for Boston families, typically held in Boston, though this year will be held virtually on Thursday, January 14th. She provided a brief update on the Culturally Responsive Practices Leadership Academy. The program's goal is to develop an action plan that spans a few years with a focus on the District being culturally responsive and putting practices in place. The recent session identified the priority to focus on the disproportionality of students being referred to special education.

STUDENT ADVISORY REPORT

Ms. White discussed a recent Student Congress meeting, wherein a group of 20 students discussed two issues. First was regarding district wide communication. She stated that currently high school students receive communications from Dr. Chisum but not Dr. Lussier and they

believed it would be helpful if district emails were sent to students as well as parents. Secondly, they discussed the social distancing requirement. She noted the consensus among the Student Congress was to maintain the six-foot requirement. They believed relaxing standards may make students feel they do not need to be as strict with other requirements and they were concerned an increase in density of students would cause more anxiety.

CONSENT AGENDA

Gift Acceptances as presented.

Ms. Chow stated that, as usual, the Committee was extremely appreciative of the generosity of all donors.

Ms. Chow entertained a motion to approve the Consent Agenda, which includes gift acceptances, as presented.

MOVED: Ms. Martin; SECONDED: Ms. Mirick; ROLL CALL: Ms. Gray – Yes; Ms. Martin – Yes; Ms. Chow – Yes; Ms. Mirick – Yes; Mr. Roberti - Yes

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY

COVID-19 UPDATES

Dr. Lussier noted there have been a total of 94 positive cases within Wellesley Public Schools since the start of the school year. Of those, approximately two-thirds have been students and one-third staff. Two-thirds of the cases have been at the secondary level. Approximately 70% have been identified through outside testing, with WPS surveillance testing identifying 30%. Based on the previous week's data, the Administration felt it was important to transition to full remote at the high school beginning January 11th, given ten positive cases had been identified in a five-day period with evidence of potential in-school transmission. He stated he consulted with the Health Department, Ms. Corridan, WHS nurses, and Dr. Chisum. They were unanimous that the prudent step was for the high school to shift to remote learning for ten days with a plan to return to hybrid January 19th.

He discussed the District is working on updating the dashboard on the web site. The Administration began meeting with the Joint Health Safety Group, which was established as part of the MOA with WEA. Any possible changes in the dashboard need to go through this group. If consensus on updates is achieved, the next step would likely be to run a webinar for staff and parents to explain changes in metrics.

Dr. Lussier addressed the Governor's recent announcement regarding a new pool testing initiative by the state. He noted the model being promoted is a different type of pool testing than WPS is utilizing and he does not foresee a change in the course that has been working well for the District. He inquired about flexibility to receive state funding; however, it seems unlikely.

Finally, he discussed the topic of full return for students. He stated he believes WPS has done a great job prioritizing students most in need to come back, namely grades Pre-K through 2 and students with the most pressing needs. He also believes the District has established standards they want to uphold, particularly the six-foot social distancing.

In terms of vaccinations, it is believed school nurses are part of Phase 1 along with first responders and the Administration was hoping to get confirmation that they'll be vaccinated in the coming week. Teachers are in Phase 2 and are forecasted to be vaccinated between February and April. Dr. Lussier noted the District is eager to learn more details.

FY22 BUDGET PRESENTATION

Ms. Chow began by reminding the Committee that the guidance given to the Administration by the Select Board and Town was for 2.5% increase. The Committee asked the Administration to budget for that 2.5% and also for level services, assuming a level service budget would require an increase greater than 2.5%.

Dr. Lussier reiterated that all Town departments received a 2.5% guideline. He noted that for the School Department, that 2.5% equals just over \$2,000,000 based on the \$80,000,000 approved at Town Meeting for FY21. He explained that level service means what it costs to maintain the same standard of service next year as the District had this year. This year, more than others, it is difficult to define "level service" because some current services are in place solely as COVID-related services.

Ms. Mahr began by describing the budget requests. Building up from last year's budget, developing a level services budget adds 2.33%. Two factors explain this, both being one-time costs expended this year. One is the COVID-related costs embedded in the base budget, which are being removed from the budget request, and the other is out of district placement costs, which have decreased, as explained below. However, new COVID-related expenses required to address educational gaps created by the pandemic were identified to add a 0.41% increase. No strategic plan requests and no other critical needs were added to the budget. Therefore, the total budget request includes a 2.74% increase.

Dr. Lussier discussed the process of building the budget. It began with the Town departments meeting to discuss the current financial picture and to establish budget assumptions. This included a discussion regarding whether there would be an additional special education appropriation this year, as was seen last year. Given the town's financial picture, that will not be possible this year. This budget is only based on the known and reasonably anticipated special education costs, though as always there is a high chance for variability. The next step was to engage with Academic Council and have discussions with each level to review budget reductions, level service, and level service with COVID-related needs. Then, the FY22 Budget Request was presented to staff via a webinar on January 7, 2021.

In terms of budget drivers, Ms. Mahr discussed the first two main factors. Regarding enrollment, she noted from FY20 to FY21 there was a drop of 396 students, primarily at the elementary level. In building the FY22 budget, the District is projecting an increase of approximately 94 students, as students who chose private schools or homeschool this year return to the District for next year. Regarding compensation, accounting for steps, lanes, and COLA increases, the base salary alone is 3.6%, though there will be savings in areas of turnover and one-time COVID-related salaries.

Ms. Orlov discussed the special education out of district placement costs as a budget driver. She noted that the number of students placed out of district has been trending down over the last few years with a projected 56 students being placed in FY22. She reiterated this is a moving number. She credited the low numbers to the great special education staff in the District and the strength of the in-District programs for the students. For these reasons, the projected budget for out of district placement costs is around \$400,000 less for FY22. Ms. Mahr added that the Circuit Breaker formula changed slightly with the Student Opportunity Act. The District has been told to expect around 70% reimbursement for FY21, which totals approximately \$3,200,000. It is not expected that transportation will be reimbursed. Additionally, special education transportation costs are expected to increase significantly with contracts going out to bid.

Ms. Mahr discussed two proposed fee increases. The District proposed to increase the tuition for the Child Lab at the high school from \$5,800 to \$6,000. This increase would generate \$3,600 for the year and it, along with cost saving measures, would result in a break-even performance for the program. There is also a proposal to increase the lesson fees for the Instrumental and Vocal Extension Program (IVEP) by \$3 in FY22 and \$2 in FY23, which would add \$48,900 in revenue.

Ms. Mahr and Mr. LaCava detailed the budget proposal by level as it pertains to staffing. At the elementary level, staffing changes for specialists are proposed largely due to decreased enrollment. Reductions will be spread across the elementary schools and include Health and Fitness, Visual Arts, and Library Assistants. Mr. LaCava noted no reductions were being made in Music, as there had been reductions in that area over the past few years. He also noted the District is expecting to have 107 elementary sections for Kindergarten through Grade 5 next year. Ms. Mahr stated that due to enrollment decline at the middle school and high school, there will be a reduction of one-half of a 7th grade cluster at the middle school and the high school will have a one section reduction across all subjects. While the above described a level service budget, the District is also presenting additional expenditures to address educational gaps created or deepened by the pandemic. These investments include social work and math paraprofessionals at the elementary level, an Academic Resource Center teacher and a Science MCAS tutor at the high school, as well as continuing the K-12 Math/Literacy Summer Program that was developed last summer. In summary with regards to staffing, a level service budget equates to a reduction of 7.04 FTE. A level service with COVID-related services budget would bring back 4.0 FTE, for a total reduction of 3.04 FTE, or approximately \$2,000,000 in savings.

The final budget category was Cash Capital. Ms. Mahr noted that there are no Cash Capital requests in the category of FF&E (Furniture, Fixtures, and Equipment) except at the District level for contracted copier leases. Ms. Dooley spoke to the technology requests. She stated the only new costs were for devices for new staff and the one-to-one program at the high school. The remainder of requests were for replacement costs. She noted typically the District replaces devices at the end of their natural life cycle. However, they are currently replacing technology only as the equipment breaks.

Dr. Lussier discussed next steps in the budget process. He noted that between January 19th and January 22nd, working groups will be held with staff present to answer questions from the School Committee and Advisory. Ms. Chow reminded the Committee and the community that the February 2nd School Committee meeting will include a public hearing on the budget. Dr. Lussier stated the School Committee is set to vote on the final budget at the February 9th meeting. There will then be an Advisory Committee review on March 3rd and Annual Town Meeting will be at the end of April or beginning of May.

In discussion with the Committee, it was reaffirmed that the Special Education Reserve Fund was available for unexpected increases in costs. On the topic of DE&I work and whether it can be seen as specific budget line items or if it was more embedded into the work across the District, Dr. Curry replied that there is certainly a cross-departmental effort in DE&I work. She stated it was imperative that the community think about how to build capacity for this work to solidify the work being done, noting that likely will require a team and additional resources.

The Committee thanked the Administration for all their work on the budget.

HHU UPDATES

Ms. Gray provided an update on the Hunnewell project. The Planning Board approved the Project of Significant Impact (PSI) unanimously the prior week. She thanked them for working through all data and details to make sure the project team was able to meet the schedule they

laid out. She noted Dr. Lussier, Ellen Quirk, and Deane McGoldrick attended the meeting. She stated the project is at the beginning of the permitting process. There will be filings with the Wetlands Committee and the Zoning Board of Appeals in the coming weeks. She will receive more details at the next Permanent Building Committee (PBC) meeting.

Ms. Martin noted there was not much to report on Hardy because PBC hasn't met since the last School Committee meeting. At the upcoming PBC meeting, topics will include moving forward with the construction manager at risk topic. She expects smaller working groups to work through schematic design details.

ADJOURNMENT

At approximately 8:28 pm, Ms. Chow entertained a motion to adjourn the meeting.

MOVED: Ms. Gray; SECONDED: Ms. Martin; ROLL CALL: Ms. Gray – Yes; Ms. Martin – Yes; Ms. Chow – Yes; Ms. Mirick – Yes; Mr. Roberti - Yes

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Mirick
Secretary

Documents and Exhibits Used:

FY22 Recommended WPS Budget

FY22 Budget Presentation to School Committee 1-12-21