Smithfield School Department

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May, 5, 2023

Dear Finance Committee Members,

My team and I have responded to the questions posed in both ClearGov and separately in the hope that they will provide you with the information you need to make a recommendation to the Town Council on appropriate funding for the School Department. These questions follow our April 19, 2023 meeting to discuss, explain, and respond to questions about our proposed budget. The questions have been considered by my team and me to provide the context that you desire. My hope is that additional information will assist you in making a recommendation that will move our schools forward to provide opportunities, supports, and increased college and career pathways, resulting in increased student achievement and well-being. As you are aware, the School Committee and I are requesting a 4% increase, which is the highest we can ask. This follows several years of appropriations from the Town below 1%.

I look forward to seeing you Monday, May 8 and Wednesday, May 10. Below I have listed the questions posed, grouping some questions that are related, with our responses. In some instances, questions were discussed and responded to at the first Finance Committee meeting on April 19, 2023 and this is referenced.

Q: Please explain the details of the increase in the process of adjustments? Where were these funds expended? There was a transfer from the Fund Balance of $2,049,417. Why?

A: The FY23 approved town budget was for $41,224,800. In late June 2022, well after the budget process was completed, the State Aid amount to the School Department was reduced by over $300,000. Some funds were restored, thanks to assistance from our state legislators, however the revised budget had to take into account the $212,693 reduction that still existed. This reduction to the operating budget necessitated transfers from fund balance and not filling several positions for one year at the district office as well as a special educator who was on leave (Yes, this impacted operations during the year).

A significant transfer for the Boyle Project was needed as we are moving forward with the project as well as equipment and wireless access points at the high school. These were necessary expenses to ensure that students and teachers would be able to use our technology throughout the building.

- $2,000,000 was approved for the Boyle Project
- $13,719.91 for the SHS AV Equipment
- $35,696.97 for the SHS Wireless Access Points

Q: What changed between the “request” and the “revised” columns in the Recommended vs. Revised Budgets? How did these changes alter the budget process?

A: Projections are used when expenses are not available from vendors, for instance health benefits, which may be received during or after the budget process. Between December and June, the School Department acquires and finalizes line items when accurate information is received. The revised column always has the most up-to-date (or final) figures. For instance, the Trust confirms medical and dental rates often after the proposed budget so these figures become "revised."

Q**: Can you provide details on the reduction of $86,854 in benefits?**

A: There was a reduction to the medical and dental benefits based on updated projections provided by the RI Trust resulting in some apparent savings. Benefits are often coordinated with the town (for instance our dental benefits). Based on the needs of our students and special education mandates for services, we are prioritizing a half time speech and language pathologist and a special educator. However, this is a one-time savings and we must be able to ensure that we can continue to fund these positions beyond one year. The needs of students within special education tend to increase vs. decrease.

Q: Can you provide details for a $90,185 increase in special education? Instructional teachers ($58,900)? Therapists ($31,285)? What numbers changed in a short period of time (enrollment drivers)?

- $58,900 is the projected cost for a Step 4 (years of experience) Special Education teacher. This is just salary as benefits are included in a separate category. As the faculty member has not been hired, this is an estimate. Depending on the pool of applicants in June, we may not be able to find a teacher with four or less years of experience and may need to hire someone with more experience. *As an example, if a public school teacher in RI with 5 years of experience leaves his or her position to join another district, that teacher would have to be hired at Step 6 (non-negotiable).*
- $31,285 is the projected cost for a Step 5, part-time Speech and Language Pathologist.

Q: What numbers (enrollment drivers) changed in such a short period of time?

While we are seeing an increase in enrollment at the elementary schools, we will be making an internal transfer of a teacher for next year. However, as the number of enrollees increases at the elementary level (new students, PK students enrolling in Kindergarten, increasing special education placements, etc.) I anticipate the need to hire at least one elementary teacher for 2024-25.

A priority is to increase student achievement and student mental health services and other special services (special education as mandated, interventionists, etc.). Reductions in any costs will assist in implementing the budget priority plan. If the cap remains at 2%, there is **no** ability to increase teachers or programs; as discussed, the current program will roll over.

Q: What is the status of ESSER grants?

A: ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund) grants were provided to districts across the country. Many districts use these funds (which provided supplemental funding to districts for 3 years) for hiring teachers and increasing programs. ESSER funds early on were used to implement support staff (for instance, the grant funded AP at SHS, full time reading intervention teacher at OCRS, etc. – these are listed in the PPT). Our greatest expense was the earmarking of $1.4 million in ESSER funds to provide air conditioning to the high school - a necessary expense but one that significantly shortchanged the instructional program.

However, this funding source has concluded.

Q: What will be the effect of "catch up" funds on the budget values?

A: The operational budget for SPS, as in other school districts, is largely focused on instructional costs, including the salaries and benefits of teachers, staff, and administration. When looking at the instructional program for students, there are a number of considerations, including these below:

- Ensuring that there is an adequate number of certified teachers for each grade level in our elementary schools; content specialists at our middle and high schools (English, Math, Social Studies, etc.); and itinerant teachers (Art, Music, PE, Health), which are required under Ed Law.
- Ensuring that we meet Rhode Island Department of Education requirements for a student to graduate in good standing from our K-12 Program.
- Ensuring there is adequate staffing to meet the needs of students (Guidance Counselors, School Psychologists, Specialists, Special Education regular and support staff).
- Providing diverse opportunities for students (accelerated and career and work-based courses, such as honors and advanced placement courses, Career and Technical Education, Career Pathway courses, internships, etc.).

The district provides regular professional development to teachers, particularly in math and English Language Arts. Certainly this is an area that could be expanded in the future however expansion is dependent on funding. However, there is no particular “catch up” funding source. We have, instead, a comprehensive plan that has seen the integration of reading teachers at the elementary schools and math interventionists in the elementary and middle schools; professional development for teachers, staff and administrators; new curriculum materials that are closely aligned to state and national standards and that promote higher order thinking skills, to name a few. We discussed Title and Grant funding at our meeting.

Q**: Enrollment related questions.**

A: Please see the updated RIDE enrollment information showing increasing enrollment for the Smithfield Public Schools (released March 2023). While enrollment is decreasing nationally in public schools as well as in RI schools, we have been showing an increase steadily over time (this information was shared in community forums and developed by the Annenberg Foundation at Brown as well as RIDE).

The contractual increases are 2% for faculty, 2% for staff (secretaries, paraprofessional) and 3% for maintenance and custodial staff for the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years. These are in the budget as they are non-negotiable. New negotiations for our three bargaining units will begin early next year (Sept. 2023) as the current contract expires June 2024.

<u>Enrollment of Homeless, Home-School, and CTE Students this year</u>

- Currently there are 33 students who are homeless; 6 of these students live outside of Smithfield and require additional transportation services. All homeless students receive transportation to and from school, regardless of where they live.
- There are 73 students receiving homeschool instruction this year. This number has remained steady at least over the past 3 years.
- There are 120 CTE Pathway students; 24 students are from outside of the district.

Q: What is the number of retirements?

A: These are included in our budget presentation and discussed at our meeting.

- 2 - 5th grade teachers
- 1 - school nurse
- 1 - .6 (half time) Consumer Food Science Teacher
- 1 - .8 Child Outreach Coordinator
- 2 paraprofessionals

All of these positions must be replaced in the budget. For instance, grade level teachers are required for the number of students under the contract so that we have classes limited to 25 students to each teacher. Each school must have a full time school nurse (required by state regs and contract). Paraprofessional support is mandated by individualized education program (IEP) goals and provides individualized services directly to students. The Consumer Food Science program has been one of the most popular electives at the high school. Since we are not meeting the demand of students and this is an area of growth for our district, we hope to have a full time Culinary program, if not next year in the year after. A comprehensive high school includes electives and electives are part of the credits required for graduation. The Child Outreach Coordinator is a teacher who oversees the required PK program in the district. There are many duties assigned to this position, however the coordinator is a special ed certified teacher who ensures that services are ensured for our youngest students with special needs.

In the budget recommendations and line items, we have reduced the teaching positions to Step 1 (a beginning teacher). This is somewhat of a risk as it would require us to have a brand new teacher for the 5th grade positions (2), the consumer food science teacher – if funded (1) , and the paraprofessionals (2) and there is not a large pool of newly graduated teachers. It also limits us to looking at a number instead of someone who may be the best choice but with some experience or with an advanced degree. This may be an area where we exceed what we budgeted, depending on the pool and the hiring committee's recommendations. In this case, savings captured elsewhere will fill the gap.

The nurse position is budgeted at a Step 10 (the highest salary on the teacher pay scale) as this is a forced recall (there was someone with tenure protections in the position when there were 6 schools and with Winsor closing, the position was eliminated. Within the contract and RIDE regulations, this personnel has first rights and is a Step 10.)

Q: Transportation: What is the status of the contract negotiations and what is the effect on the budget if a contract falls below the anticipated 21% increase? What would you do with savings?

As we conclude our 3-year contract as of June 30, 2023, we were required to go out to bid. We entered the process with two districts, Burrillville and North Smithfield. Smithfield received 2 bids. These bids were analyzed by our district team, scored based on a rubric, and a recommendation was made to the School Committee for approval to enter contract negotiations. At the May 1 meeting, we received approval and negotiations will begin the second week in May. A new contract is expected to take effect for July 1.

Regardless of the vendor chosen for the School District, we will have a significant increase in transportation costs next year. IF there are savings it will need to remain with transportation in case an additional bus is needed and for the anticipated extra costs (not realized yet) for the athletic program or special ed. If the Boyle Project schedule is adhered to, Fall and perhaps Winter, sports will be played outside of Smithfield. This will impact practices as well and increased transportation services are necessary.

Additionally, there is also the Statewide Transportation vendor. We do **not** have negotiation rights. As discussed at our last meeting, we anticipate higher costs for regular services, athletic expenses, and special education in transportation. **<u>We do not anticipate savings however we hope the overages will not further impact the general operating budget.</u>**

Q: What is the purpose of the Program Management account?

A: This supports the Director of Special Education, a Secretary in the Special Education office, transition services, Early Childhood Coordinator, and the ESY Coordinator. ESY is the extended school year program that is mandated for special education students and encompasses 3-22 years.

Q: You requested a 45% increase ($206K), please provide the drivers and values.

A: The increased cost represents the increased number of students that we will be providing transition services for. Each school district is required by law to provide transition services to special needs students through age 22. When we calculated the cost of offering all transition services in house, the figure was higher than contracted employees, largely because we do not have to provide benefits.

Q: Therapists, Psychologists, Evaluators, Personal Attendants & Social Workers: Provide drivers and values, number of visits, number of contact hours, explanation if increase in contact time, what is the trend?

A: This question requires significant additional time to tabulate all hours so it has been condensed to respond to the question as factually as possible. Please note that contact hours per support personnel (psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, etc.) would be a tremendous undertaking to try to capture however you may reference the ratio of support staff to students (this slide is in your PPT).

- There is a projected increase from our vendors to provide such services as behavioral therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy. These are based on the IEP programs for individual programs and represent the current student population. Please be aware that IEP meetings occur throughout the year. By the end of each year, a new IEP must be developed. This increased cost is based on what we know for actuals as well as increased rates and services.

The chart below contains the special education census numbers as of December 2022.

2018	2018	2020	2021	2022
363	377	358	366	381

Out-of-district special ed transportation costs are through the Statewide contract. As stated earlier, the expenses are not negotiable. This is a required vendor by RIDE. While the costs have increased substantially, the number of buses and routes has not changed.

Q: Educational Initiatives - are they in the budget proposal?

A: Programs that will move our district forward are listed, along with their costs, in the budget proposal. During the finance meeting, the School Committee meeting, and in the slides, I provide priorities based upon funding levels. Shifting the Consumer Food Science part-time class to a full-time Culinary class is not in the budget, for instance. A full time music teacher, from the part-time position (.6) at SHS is not in the budget. Additional personnel are not in the budget (an English Language Arts/Social Studies Coordinator or a Multilingual Learners teacher, for instance).

We discussed opportunities to increase the CTE and other work-based programs in our last meeting.

Q: Addressing RICAS scores

A: Math interventionists and Math Coordinator, as well as the newly adopted Math Curriculum K-8. Reading specialists in the elementary schools, new curricula K-12. Professional development for teachers, staff and administrators. Intervention plans based on data. There are many avenues to address trends. RICAS scores broken out by subgroup, along with other assessments and measures, provide data used to inform our planning, progress monitoring, and funding allocations.

Q: Are there plans for expanded CTE?

Yes.