

Frequently Asked Questions

There are many misconceptions surrounding public school operations. The following are questions that are frequently posed to the Board of Education.

Question #1: Why doesn't the District transition to solar power at the schools to save on energy costs?

This alternative energy source has been considered and determined not to be a viable solution under the current circumstances because:

- There are often grants to install panels on roofs, but this doesn't automatically equate to a savings because:
 - They need to be installed on brand new roofs that have similar lifespans. Panels have an anticipated lifespan of 30 years, with their energy producing abilities declining year over year. Failing to time installation correctly results in the costly removal and reinstallation of panels.
 - Two people are needed to do maintenance on a panel free roof. This increases to three when panels are installed because of trip hazards and the need to identify cables. As a result, the expense of performing maintenance and repairs increases.
- There is a higher infrastructure cost associated with installing panels on the ground, often making this option less likely to receive grant funding. The District will continue to look for such funding opportunities, while also weighing the potential for natural or human caused damage to the structures.

Question #2: Why didn't the District apply for the electric bus grant?

The Stonington administration team spent a considerable amount of time researching and attending information seminars on an electric bus grant that was announced last Fall. It was not pursued because:

- Stonington's per capita income was too high to qualify for funding of the buses, which cost around \$400K.
- The District may have qualified for grant funded installation of the charging stations because of a lack of such infrastructures in this area. Accepting this funding came with the requirement that all electric school buses from any district be permitted to use Stonington's charging station at the expense of SPS.
- Stonington contracts with an outside vendor for transportation services, and we do not own the existing buses. If the contractor had pursued and been awarded the grant funding, they would have had to destroy one diesel bus for every electric one obtained. The oldest in the existing fleet are no where near the end of their lifespan.

Question #3: Why are teacher reductions always the first solution to lowering costs?

The development of the budget begins with a line-by-line analysis of all programming and expenses. The goal is to reduce costs where possible without reducing offerings. As is illustrated in this year's three iteration process, the proposed budget of 7.89% is lower than the contractual obligations. Any further reductions will impact all areas of the organization, including academics, athletic, extracurriculars, and operations. Unfortunately though, teacher salaries are by far the largest part of the education budget. When large scale reductions are

required, salaries are one of the few line items that can achieve such large reductions. There are many expenses that cannot be controlled; some examples include:

- Special education paraeducator positions, as these staffing decisions must be made in compliance with students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). An IEP is a plan developed to ensure that a child with an identified disability receives specialized instruction or related services.
- Building or district administrators, as these 12 positions serve critical roles that mitigate liability and keep the District in compliance with mandates. There are so few people in these positions, each with specialized areas of expertise, making it impossible to delegate one position's tasks to others.
- Operational expenses, such as transportation, utilities, and insurance, all areas that we have little to no control over the increases imposed by vendors.

Question #4: How can the Annex Program be efficient with so few students enrolled?

- The Annex offers multi-faceted programming for a subset of students with unique needs. One offering is an alternate high school setting for students in grades 9 through 12; there are currently 6 students enrolled. The second is the Life Skills Program for students aged 17 to 22 who have special needs; there are currently 7 students enrolled.
- At its inception, the program was established with existing staff and at the Central Administrative Building, keeping costs minimal.
- The district is required by law to cover the cost of transition services for our population of students with intellectual disabilities until they reach the age of 22.
- There are outside organizations that provided these services prior to The Annex, the cost of which was upwards of \$50,000 per year per student.

Question #5: Why do decreases in enrollment not result in an immediate budget reduction?

Decreases in enrollment do not happen in neat classroom-sized units. A decrease in enrollment at the elementary level is typically spread out across all six of the grade levels. It could take multiple years of declining enrollment to result in a reduction of a classroom-sized cut in any one grade level.

Question #6: Why is the District spending so much money on substitute personnel?

The cost of substitute teachers has increased substantially since the beginning of the pandemic for two primary reasons:

- Staff members who test positive for COVID-19 must remain out of work for at least 5 days to mitigate student/staff contagion rates.
- The increased demand for substitute teachers resulted in an exponential increase to the average pay rate for this portion of our workforce. To compete in a tight labor market, SPS increased per diem rates and hired full-time building substitutes with higher wages and benefits to ensure continuity of student services.

Additionally, the District continues to use substitute teachers to assist in the development of curriculum required by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). This service can be outsourced, but managing the process internally results in an almost 50% cost savings while maintaining a high level of quality control.

Question #7: Why aren't the District and Town looking for more efficiencies such as shared personnel or utility plans?

Though both are municipalities, the Board and the Town have their own set of nuances and varying mandated responsibilities. They do share in many ways that yield a savings, including heating oil, diesel fuel, gasoline, and health, liability, and worker's compensation insurance policies. The teams work very cooperatively, allowing for continual discussions on and receptively to potential cost savings.

Question #9: Is the HVAC system at Stonington Middle School impacting this year's budget?

No. This is a large project that will not be included in a school or District budget. The cost of related parts and services has increased substantially since this project was initially proposed, but discussions will continue as an unfunded mandate is forthcoming.

Question #10: Why are administrators paid higher than teachers, and what do they do?

Public school administrators require a higher level of education and/or State certification than is required to teach. Even in districts that pay at or above the DRG average, which Stonington does not, the qualifications required of these positions are highly valued in the private sector. Offering competitive wages is necessary to attract high quality staff for these roles that manage a wide array of functions, including:

- *Spending time in classrooms to observe and coach teachers.* The root of Stonington's success is its outstanding teachers. Both new and seasoned educators need professional development on best practices in teaching and learning, especially in an environment of everchanging curriculum requirements from the CSDE. Administrators stay abreast of the lengthy state communications, research them, and guide and implement necessary changes – allowing teachers to focus on teaching.
- *The CT General Assembly continues to impose more and more unfunded mandates on districts.* Administrators continue to facilitate past unfunded mandates while finding ways to manage new ones without increasing resources. Extensive reporting is required on staff, students, and operations throughout the year, prescribed professional development additions range from bloodborne pathogens to human trafficking, and Board of Education policies must continually be revised for legal compliance.
- *Protecting the District from liability is less costly than defending against it.* The District handles a large number of sensitive, personnel related circumstances that must be handled in a manner consistent with Board policy, regulations imposed by state and federal government, the Commission on Human Rights Organization, and six different labor unions. Each has unique, and at times contradictory, governing language. Proper Human Resources management is critical to student safety and reduces the likelihood of lengthy and expensive legal situations.
- *Responding to parents and other community stakeholders.* Today's parents and citizens expect a much higher level of transparency and responsiveness from administrators. Reducing its ability to meet these expectations is not beneficial for the District or for its stakeholders.
- *Administrators are working towards solutions to increasing expenses.* This year alone, the district has been awarded grants to fund major security projects, increase mental health services, and offer out-of-school programming. Though the submission and

management of such funding is labor intensive, it is a viable option to continue to improve our school system despite the rising costs that everyone is facing.

It is also important to note that:

- *Administrator layoffs would reduce the least senior people – likely both administrators and teachers.* Union contracts dictate layoffs according to seniority, so layoffs would reduce those with the lowest salaries, thereby yielding the lowest savings. These administrators would also have the right to return to teaching, which would result in additional teacher layoffs. Since teacher salaries increase as education and years of experience do, administrators would return to the classroom at the highest pay, likely replacing two teachers new to the District.
- *Full-time assistant principals were added to each building when the State mandated a new labor-intensive teacher observation and evaluation system.* At that time, the Board of Education discussed the possibility of hiring recently retired administrators or other consultants to assist with this new workload. In the end, investing in these positions was the most beneficial option. The evaluation system has only intensified since that time. Assistant principals are critical positions necessary to maintain the positive culture and climate at each school.