

2023-2024 BOE Budget FAQ

Q: When is the RSD #17 budget referendum and what are we voting on?

A: On May 2, 2023, the RSD 17 Board of Education 2023/24 School gross budget of \$47,655,708.22 (or a 5.83% increase over last year's gross budget) will be brought to the towns of Haddam and Killingworth for a referendum vote. After revenue, grants, and fund balances, each town will be assessed: Haddam \$28,439,380 (61.5%) and Killingworth \$17,831,251 (38.5%). Voting will take place from 6:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. in the regular voting locations.

Q: How is the budget determined? How does the Board of Education come up with the numbers?

A: The budget process begins each Fall; the Superintendent assesses the school's needs, estimates revenues, and prioritizes expenditures. He brings his proposed budget to the Board of Education at the beginning of March for a review process that includes four workshops, two meetings with Boards of Selectmen and Boards of Finance from each town, and two community input opportunities. All efforts are made to balance the District's priorities with the feedback from the stakeholders. The Board of Education then discusses and adopts a final gross budget to bring to the voters at referendum.

Q: Why does the budget keep going up when enrollment keeps going down?

A: There are three reasons the District annual budget would rise or fall due to changes in enrollment: 1) one on one (or high needs Individual Education Plans) special education services for a student are needed or eliminated because the student joins or leaves the district, and 2) the district enrollment increases or declines significantly at one class level thereby eliminating or adding a full class and teaching staff to support it, and 3) adding or losing enough students to impact supplementary services such as reading/math intervention, speech or language, etc. Otherwise, slight enrollment changes from year to year do not affect budgetary costs on an annual basis. In addition, even with enrollment reductions contractual salary increases and benefits paired with other inflationary increases offset reductions in staff due to enrollment declines as mentioned above. Despite those fixed increase expenditures each year, the budget increase over the last 10 years has remained at an average of 2.02%, below inflation. Per pupil spending is the second lowest of all neighboring towns as well as below the state average.

Q: Why is our budget so high when other local districts like Old Saybrook spend so much less?

A: There are several reasons school districts have varying annual budgets: 1) There is a difference between a regional and local school budget. RSD17 is a *regional* district and therefore owns and maintains all of its buildings and facilities. Building maintenance and costs for a local school district are carried in the local municipal budget, and 2) the total number of students being served will make budgets vary, and 3) the number of school buildings a district operates will drive budgetary costs - especially if the buildings have significant vacant space due to declined enrollment - the fewer and fuller school buildings are, the fewer redundant staff needed to operate them.

A more factual way to compare school district budgets is by the Per-pupil Expenditure by the State of CT. When the State determines each town's Per-Pupil Expenditure, it is adjusted for "an apples to apples" comparison between local and regional school districts by including all current public elementary and secondary expenditures, and excluding reimbursable regular education transportation, tuition revenue, capital expenditures for land, buildings and equipment, and debt service. RSD17 actually spends less than almost every nearby district and less than the state average per pupil (see chart above.)

Q: What are the biggest Budget Drivers causing an increase YOY?

A:

- **Utility and Transportation Inflation - \$1,000,000**
 - Electric/Oil/Diesel/Gas/Propane
 - Transportation
- **Salary and Benefit Increases - \$925,000**
 - Wages
 - Health Insurance and Other Benefits
- **Additional Investments Aligned with the District's Strategic Plan - \$900,000**
 - Educator and Leadership Professional Development
 - Introduction of a new reading program: The Science of Reading
 - New Textbooks
 - Special Education Audit/Assessment
 - Additional Speech and Language Pathologist Assistant
 - District-wide Security and Safety Audit/Assessment
 - Full 2% funding of the Capital Fund

Q: Please explain the increase in Transportation, and what is the cost of the entire three-year contract?

A: Transportation increases of \$640,588 (including associated expenses) are mainly driven by the District's bus contract renewal and Special Education transportation. Competitive labor market pressures and a shortage of bus drivers have forced STA to hire out-of-town bus drivers at a costly rate (almost \$300K annually) to meet the needs of the District. Having said that, the renewed daily rate per bus is still lower than all districts that have recently renewed their transportation contracts or gone out to bid for new transportation contracts. The new three-year contract includes a 17% percent increase in the first year, 9% in the second year, and 5% in the third year. The total cost for transportation over the next three years is estimated to be \$8,738,700.

Q: Is the district looking into a K-8 bus route?

A: The district asked STA (bus contractor) for cost estimates if school hours were changed to combine different grade levels. STA provided a preliminary review that showed little to no cost difference. However, it is something the District will look into with more fidelity for the future.

Q: Is the district purchasing the new English Language Arts Curriculum, Wit and Wisdom to satisfy the Science of Reading state mandate?

A: To meet a new State of Connecticut mandate that English Language Arts for grades K - 3 Curriculum be based on the "Science of Reading" research, RSD 17 is making an investment in a new curriculum. The District has piloted these programs extensively and have seen improved achievement from those students that have participated.

Wit and Wisdom, Geodes, Heggerty, and Foundations make up our selections to meet the state mandate. We have budgeted \$128,842.16 in the 2023/24 budget for Wit and Wisdom course material, teachers' guides, and professional development to be purchased as part of the ELA curriculum for grades K-5 for next year.

Because these programs are not on the limited "State Approved Programs" to meet this mandate, the District has applied for a waiver to the State Board of Education for approval. The District anticipates that it will receive this approval. We can appeal the decision if unfavorable, but we have every reason to believe, since all of these programs are based on the Science of Reading, that they will be approved.

Q: Is the district still funding classroom libraries?

A: The District continues to fund library books for school libraries, however, there was no request to make additional investments in this year's budget for classroom libraries.

Q: How much money has been budgeted for the Capital Needs line 721 for the 2023/24 fiscal year?

A: The 2023/24 budget includes a maximum of 2% or \$900,614 investment into the RSD 17 Capital Needs line 721 - which will be used for capital projects or placed in the Capital Fund. . The state allows all regional districts up to 2% of their budget to be invested in a Capital Fund for infrastructure projects.

Q: What is the Safety Audit/Assessment?

A For the 2023/24 school year, RSD 17 will focus on enhancing the Safety and Security of all four campuses. The district will begin this initiative by investing in a Security Assessment, including a comprehensive report by the state police, to be completed on all RSD 17 buildings and infrastructure. Once this has been completed, a plan for next steps will be created and included in the District's Master Plan.

Q: What is the amount of the outstanding State Reimbursement from building projects including the field house?

The CT Office of School Construction Grants and Review (OSCG&R) is still in the process of completing its audits of the HKHS Energy Project and the Field House Renovation, and the BES and KES oil tank replacement projects. The District has applied in excess of \$1.3mm in reimbursements, but will not know what the outstanding reimbursement totals will be until the State completes its audits to determine what costs are applicable for reimbursement..

Q: For years the front windows at Burr have been an eyesore - random curtains and window blinds that are a mess. Is there any way this can be addressed to improve the look at Burr?

The District has priced out the cost of solar shades and is exploring options to improve the appearance of the front of Burr.

Q: What is the update with the white house on school property? Is it still in use? Is it still used by Youth and Family? What is the plan?

The White House is used by HK Parks and Rec and Youth and Families Services of Haddam-Killingworth (HKYFS) Discussions have been ongoing over the years about the use of the White House but no decisions have been made by the district or BoE at this point.

Q: What is the amount in the budget for water testing at KES?

A: The District has budgeted \$4,000 for mandatory, annual water testing which includes lead, calcium, alkalinity, and PFAS testing.

Q: What does the district pay for bottled water at KES because of the PFAS situation?

A: The District paid just under \$2,000 for bottled water at KES this year.

Q: How much money was saved by eliminating 16 FTEs and where is the money being budgeted?

A: The reduction in 16 FTEs offers the District an annual savings - \$675,000 for fiscal year 2023/24. Staff reductions are usually included in the annual budget because the staff positions are not needed in the coming year's staffing plan. The money saved by eliminating staff positions allows the District to reduce the budget by that amount, it isn't "budgeted" to another line. However, due to other lines increasing due to inflation, other changes or investments, the total budget can still increase from one year to the next despite FTE reductions.