



A Message from Dr. Alexandra Estrella, Superintendent of Norwalk Public Schools

Response to the Common Council's Feb. 28 Discussion of the Budget Cap

As we wait for the Common Council to set a budget cap for FY2023-24, the Norwalk Board of Education and I want to address several lingering questions regarding our request for more funding from the City of Norwalk to maintain a level of operation that our scholars and our families have come to expect from Norwalk Public Schools.

First, we want to thank all the families and community members who have raised their voices in support of our schools and our scholars. Your time and passion have not gone unnoticed, and we appreciate you stepping up for your school district to insist on adequate funding.

We remain committed to finding ways to meet the needs of our scholars with the budget set by the city. We will always strive not to compromise the quality and accessibility of the programs we currently offer.

Our Scholars Rely on Our Personnel

Education is a people business, and our teachers and staff are the most important resource available for delivering a high-quality education to our scholars. Every staff position added over the last five years has been to deliver that high quality education to all our scholars.

Prior to the pandemic, Norwalk Public Schools added personnel to address an influx of multilingual learners as well as an increase in our special education population.

As has been pointed out and as shared in our budget books, since 2018, Norwalk Public Schools has added 383 full-time equivalent employees (FTEs). Approximately 80 percent of those were related to teachers (217) and paraeducators (86).

The addition of 217 teachers addressed the expansion of multilingual learning, helped to build capacity and stay compliant for special education students. This need was clearly stated during prior budget processes and our intent to add these positions for these services was always clearly articulated. Additionally, we recently provided our scholars additional academic supports from math and English/language arts improvement teachers. The 86 paraeducators also addressed the MLL expansion and special education compliance.

Throughout the years, NPS has been very clear in discussing this need and during each budget process, we have demonstrated and made the case for this need.

In his budget request for FY2020-21, former Superintendent Dr. Steven Adamowski asked for \$216 million for the FY2020-21 budget to address the district's changing demographics and growing high-needs population. The city ultimately approved a budget that was \$8 million less.

The district's high needs population had increased from 54 percent in FY2014-15 to 68 percent in FY2020-21. For Connecticut's Accountability reporting, high needs students belong to one or more of the following subgroups: economically-disadvantaged, English learners (MLLs), or students with disabilities (SWD).

For the FY2021-22 operating budget, Norwalk BOE requested a 4.5 percent (\$8.9 million) increase. On the eve of approving the budget, the city decided to flat fund the district "with the understanding that (the BOE) would use their American Rescue Plan funds to somehow compensate for the increase they're anticipating."

In response to the flat funding, the Norwalk BOE shifted funding for existing social workers and school counselors from the local budget to grants because these positions satisfied the federal guidelines for the use of ESSER funds. The governor's executive order also stated that to receive the federal relief dollars, school districts were required to guarantee no employees would be laid off.

School counselors and social workers serve as our first responders for students needing social and emotional support. Over the last two years, they have helped our students transition back to being in school full time, surrounded by their peers, but the pressure of being a kid exists far beyond the impact of the pandemic. They still have to navigate the pressure of school, and friends, and family, and the many changes that come along with getting older.

These positions, currently covered by ESSER funds, will cost \$6.6 million to bring back into the local budget and would account for 3 percent of the increased requested for the FY2023-24 budget.

With all of these actions, some are now insinuating that the Norwalk Board of Education misused its federal COVID-19 relief dollars by adding and maintaining positions that directly addressed the guidelines set by the federal government for the use of those funds.

The U.S. Department of Education stated the ESSER funds could be used "to develop or implement an innovative approach to providing instruction to accelerate learning and mitigate the effects of lost instructional time for students most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic." The district hired 16 math improvement teachers and 15 English/language arts improvement teachers to provide additional academic supports for our scholars.

We need to maintain all of our personnel to continue providing the mandated services for our scholars and addressing the challenges that remain with us.

Gradual Plans Nixed

Several members of the Common Council suggested a "gradual plan" be implemented to address the Norwalk BOE's budget request over a period of time. It is important to point out that this is exactly what the BOE proposed last year. In light of the flat funding the prior year and in anticipation of the ESSER funds expiring, the BOE FY2022-23 budget included four scenarios to

gradually address the expiration of ESSER funds over a three-year period to specifically to avoid the financial situation we find ourselves in today.

The city considered none of them and instead opted to only fund the BOE base budget of 4.5 percent and not address the expiration of ESSER dollars.

In addition to a scenario where the BOE increase was only 4.5 percent with an address of the expiring ESSER funds two years later, the BOE also presented a gradual phased in approach where the ESSER expiration could be addressed over a three-year period requiring incremental annual increases to level set for the flat funding rather than a huge increase after the ESSER funds had expired.

The Norwalk Board of Education proposed not one but four gradual plans to address the expiration of ESSER dollars, and the city did not heed our call. To implement a gradual correction today, after the ESSER funds have been depleted, cannot be accomplished without service cuts.

Transparency Is Imperative

Throughout this budget process, we have gone to great lengths to be transparent in explaining how our requested funds will be spent. We even approved the FY2023-24 budget on December 23, a full month earlier than previous years, specifically to give everyone sufficient time to review and comment on the budget.

Every dollar committed to the Norwalk Board of Education will go toward ensuring all our scholars have the tools to be successful in the classroom, stay socially and emotionally healthy, and graduate future ready.

Chief Financial Officer Lunda Asmani gave several presentations to the Norwalk Board of Education explaining the budget breakdown. He has continued to answer questions and provide greater detail during subsequent board and Finance Committee meetings. His office also published the FY2023-24 Operating Budget book that provides all the numbers.

The BOE Finance team and others have responded to many of the questions coming from the community, and we've tried to provide those answers in one convenient location on the Norwalk Public Schools website.

Assistant Superintendent of Schools Rob Pennington gave a presentation specifically addressing the increasing costs of our higher needs students and our efforts to keep more of them in the district to receive their education.

Upon my arrival to Norwalk Public Schools, the Board of Education and I requested quarterly meetings with the city to review the budget so we could address any and all concerns year round rather than at the height of the budget season. We have not seen interest from the city to meet once the budget season is over, but we believe it is important that the Norwalk Common Council stay actively involved and informed beyond the typical budget cycle.

Our CFO delivers monthly financial reports at each Board of Education regular meeting. He also provides greater detail of those reports at the monthly Finance Committee meetings.

The Work Continues

The true impact of next year's budget will only come once the city finalizes the cap on the FY2023-24 Operating Budget. As always, we will strive not to compromise the quality and accessibility of the programs we currently offer.

Our scholars and our families have shown over the last few weeks that they deeply care for their schools and their community. We want to ensure them that we can and will continue to offer the services that they rely on and will produce scholars that graduate future ready as global citizens.