



## **A Message from Erica DePalma and Norwalk BOE**

### **Letter to the Editor: 2023-2024 BOE Budget**

As Board of Education members, we want to do our best to be transparent in our thought process and decisions as we move through this budget season.

One of the most important responsibilities we have as Board of Education members is to determine the financial needs and direct the funds necessary to run the schools. To make these determinations, we listen to district leadership, school staff that present to us at board meetings, families in our community, and the voice of our constituents.

While the Board of Education is a line item under the city's operating budget, we cannot stress enough that our "department" is much different than other city departments such as Public Works, Planning & Zoning, Recreation & Parks and Public Safety. The Board of Education reports directly to an elected board, and it is an agent of the state, unlike the city's other departments.

When putting together the BOE budget, the district goes through a rigorous eight-step process. As shown by our Chief Financial Officer, Lunda Asmani, the initial increase considered during this process was 18.7 percent. Through their work and in collaboration with board members, that increase came down to 14.9 percent and ultimately landed with the superintendent's recommendation of 12.7 percent.

We have three main drivers attributing to that request. One is a driver we see every year – contractual obligations to our staff including increases to salaries and benefits as well as an annual increase of health insurance costs.

For the 2023-24 recommended budget, elementary school staff wages are \$44.5 million, middle school staff wages are \$21.3 million and high school wages \$33.1 million.

The second driver relates to the costs we have funded the past two years with grant dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief funds. The federal government allowed Boards of Education to use these funds to cover costs related to the social and emotional well-being of our students and staff and to mitigate learning loss.

We used \$6.6 million of these grant funding to keep our school counselors and social workers who were already working in our district on staff. We used another portion of \$5.2 million to add reading/writing and math improvement teachers to accelerate the learning of our students in these areas when they returned to their classrooms.

This personnel was needed before the pandemic, and we will need it going forward, but the grant funding expires in September 2024 and we've nearly depleted the dollars already.

We've been fortunate to fill these positions as well as many others, bouncing back from two years of staffing losses. In the first half of FY 2023, Norwalk Public Schools filled 87 percent of its vacancies.

The funds we rollover are mainly due to having not filled those vacancies in the past then having the money budget for those positions left over. As we budget for the following year, we need to account for each position we anticipate filling.

We want to make sure that we keep our improvement teachers on staff, because with our Scientific Research-Based Intervention system, we are identifying students who need academic intervention services earlier in their academic careers. This was a great concern to many families and one that the superintendent made it a point to address quickly in her tenure.

The third main driver in our budget request is the increasing cost to service our special needs students. The district is obligated to provide the services that are dictated in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). The cost of providing all these services is constantly in flux due to new students entering the district who may require more costly services or currently enrolled students may have their IEP change, also leading to an increase in cost.

This population of students has also grown dramatically over the last 10 years. As much as we want to keep these students in our district, sometimes we have to send them out of the district to provide them with the services they need, and the cost of that transfer is also steadily increasing. The state provides some reimbursement, but each year, it increases the threshold of when that reimbursement will kick in. Out of district tuition is projected to increase from \$8.67 million in FY22, with an FY23 projection of \$10.6 million. Based on this projection FY expenses are budgeted at \$11.2 million.

Another state mandate was the increase in age for our post high school specialized support. Due to the outcome of the state court case AR vs. the Connecticut State Board of Education in 2020, this new law in CT dictates that special education eligibility has increased coverage up to age 22. The incremental impact on the 2022-23 school year budget and beyond is over \$1 million. This is an additional cost to the district which did not exist prior to the change in this law.

I encourage you all to visit the 2023-2024 NPS Budget website that answers many of these questions and more. The BOE is committed to providing these details and being as transparent as possible.