



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

Letter to the Editor: 2023-2024 BOE Budget

The Norwalk Board of Education and my administration have one goal for the requested 2023-2024 operating budget: to maintain the level of service that our students and families have come to expect and most certainly deserve.

Each dollar requested ensures our students can learn in a safe and healthy environment, that they can receive the academic instruction necessary for them to graduate future ready, and that they are fully supported socially and emotionally to enter this ever-changing and diverse world as civically responsible, globally engaged and positively-contributing citizens.

Anything less than the requested funding would be detrimental to our students, their families, and the many people in our schools who support them everyday without the requested funding.

Our teachers, para-educators, school counselors and social workers account for 83 percent of Norwalk Public Schools employees. Any reduction in personnel or programming would proportionately impact these professionals the most.

Even reducing the budget request by 1 percent would cut approximately \$2.1 million which translates to losing 18 positions among our teachers, interventionists, school counselors, social workers, and district wide staff that work in Central Office.

Norwalk Public Schools was fortunate to receive such generous funding from the federal government to help us navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic and bring our students back to the classroom where they learn best. We spent the federal dollars responsibly and within the guidelines set forth by the grant funding.

We used the funds to make as many one-time purchases as possible that allowed us to reopen our schools before any other district in Connecticut, but many of our needs went beyond a one-time purchase and are still needed going forward.

The directive of the federal government gave us latitude to use their grants to cover the costs of our school counselors and social workers. These professionals were already accounted for under our local budget, but when the city gave us the directive to “somehow compensate” for their flat funding using the increase of grant money in 2021, we did as we were told and as we could – we transferred their salaries and benefits under the grant budget.

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.

The recent Youth Survey by The Norwalk Partnership showed some promising results with fewer middle school and high school students reporting that they were suffering from depression. Do we really want to see those numbers go up again because we can't afford to have a counselor or social worker in each building on a full-time basis? Can a student who is truly struggling afford to wait one more day for a counselor to cycle back through their school?

How about the student who is receiving extra support in language arts or math because there is a full-time improvement teacher in their school? Prior to the pandemic, only a handful of schools could provide this service to students struggling in these content areas. Federal funds allowed us to expand these services to more students. The need was there before 2020, and it will remain a need going forward.

Many of these students don't necessarily qualify for special education services, but it doesn't mean their struggle in school is any less concerning. The burden of providing extra support for these students will fall to the classroom teachers, who are already stretched thin and exerting every effort to prepare each of their students for the next grade level.

Norwalk Public Schools is proud to serve many of our students with special needs in their home schools through programs such as STARS, SUCCESS and PINE as well as our 18-22 programming, Next Steps and Project Search.

Over the last 10 years, we have seen this population increase by nearly 15 percent, and the cost to educate them requires more money to ensure they receive the appropriate services and learning instruction from qualified professionals. The costs to provide these services is increasing and so is the dollar amount at which we can get reimbursed.

How can we tell these students and their families that the lack of funding is the reason they have to leave their friends and the teachers and support staff who know them best?

We as a district remain committed to working with the city throughout this budget season. Not only are we invested in making sure students have the educational services they are entitled to but that we remain cognizant of the impact our budget has on taxpayers and the lives of our community members.

We do not want to compromise the quality and accessibility of the programs we currently offer. We also want to make sure that we don't lose personnel, particularly those who call Norwalk home and whose loss will have a direct impact on our community as a whole.