



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

Response to the Norwalk Mayor's Recommendation for the 2023-2024 Operating Budget

Coming into this year's budget season, Norwalk Public Schools understood the uphill battle we faced in securing the funding necessary to ensure all our scholars had the tools to be successful in the classroom, stay socially and emotionally healthy, and graduate future ready.

With the mayor's recommendation of a 4 percent increase, announced at the Common Council's Finance & Claims Committee meeting last night, we can't even address our simplest obligation to pay the salaries and benefits of our staff. It also completely ignores the needs stated over and over again to address the expiration of ESSER funds and the ever-increasing costs of specialized education.

The 12.7 percent increase requested by the Norwalk Board of Education wasn't a number pulled out of a hat or an overestimate to negotiate to some middle ground. The number was whittled down from 18.7 percent to 14.9 percent and finally to 12.7 percent, and cuts beyond that number will come at a significant cost to our scholars, our staff and our families.

We also can't forget the impact of the city's flat funding of the district in 2020-2021 that forced the Board of Education to fund existing social workers and school counselors with one-time federal grant dollars at a cost of \$6.6 million. It would have required a 3 percent increase to the budget at that time. To bring them back into the local budget now and maintain a traditional budget trajectory would require an 8.5 percent increase.

Numerous times through this budget process, we've been asked, "What happens if the BOE funding request isn't approved?"

Simply put, everything is at risk – all programming and personnel outside of classroom instruction (band, orchestra, theater, middle and high school sports, field trips, department chairs), resources that provide individual attention to students (aides, interventionists, paraprofessionals, school counselors, and teachers).

Any individual attention a child is receiving in our schools today will be significantly reduced next year under this budget recommendation.

The city cannot continue to operate as if the Board of Education is just another department that can be budgeted at the same rate as everyone else. We employ over 2,000 people, and we provide a crucial service to 11,630 of Norwalk's most vulnerable citizens, not to mention their families who also rely heavily on the schools.

We understand the city has to consider the needs of all its citizens and specifically in this case, the financial well-being of our residents. We would urge the city and our neighbors to look beyond the tax bill and to the cost of living in neighborhoods with poor schools, the loss of property values, the economic outlook for our scholars who cannot access the resources they need for the jobs of tomorrow.

Our mission is to provide an excellent and equitable education for all our scholars, and our budgetary request to make sure we fulfill that mission is not a want but a need. The necessary funding is crucial not only for our scholars but for the future of Norwalk.

We thank everyone who continues to advocate for appropriate levels of school funding in Norwalk. As we navigate our financial future, please know that our focus remains on our scholars and providing them with the best education possible with the resources available.

We strongly urge you to continue your advocacy at these upcoming meetings, especially the meetings with in person public comment:

Monday, Feb. 13 at 6:30 p.m. - Board of Estimate and Taxation (Virtual)

Agenda: <https://www.norwalkct.org/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/20410>

How to participate via Zoom:

Click this link to log into the meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86030945988?pwd=YVI3V2JVckhkZ1VoZFdTL1FjT1dQQT09>

Webinar ID: 860 3094 5988

Password: 144344

Dial In: 646-558-8658

Tuesday, Feb. 14 at 6:30 p.m. - Common Council Special Meeting (In Person & Virtual)

Agenda: Not yet available. Common Council website:

<https://apps.norwalkct.org/meetingboard/commoncouncil>

Location: Norwalk City Hall, Common Council Chambers, 125 East Ave. 3rd Floor

How to participate via Zoom:

Click this link to log into the meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85140970275?pwd=eFJhWFBOOXIKVi82aTZYYWt6WExTUT09>

Webinar ID: 851 4097 0275

Password: 377930

Dial In: 646-558-8658

Tuesday, Feb. 14 at 7:30 p.m. - Common Council Regular Meeting (immediately following the Special Meeting)

Agenda: Not yet available. Common Council website:

<https://apps.norwalkct.org/meetingboard/commoncouncil>

Location: Norwalk City Hall, Common Council Chambers, 125 East Ave. 3rd Floor

How to participate in person: Sign up on the paper sheet before the 7:30 meeting. Public comments are limited to 3 minutes.

How to participate via Zoom:

- Click the "raise your hand" icon in the Zoom meeting to address the council. Public comments are limited to 3 minutes.

Click this link to log into the Zoom meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85140970275?pwd=eFJhWFBOOXIKVi82aTZYYWt6WExTUT09>

Webinar ID: 851 4097 0275

Password 377930

Dial In: 646-558-8658

Thursday, Feb. 23 at 6:30 p.m. - Common Council's Finance & Claims Committee public hearing

Tuesday, March 7 at 7:30 p.m. - Common Council meeting

Wednesday, March 22 at 6:30 p.m. - Board of Estimate & Taxation public hearing