

BERLIN-BOYLSTON REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
BUDGET-RELATED “FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS”

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What is the cost to run BMS in 2025? Is this more or less than 2024?

The proposed budget for Berlin Memorial for FY 25 is \$5,051,283. The FY24 budget is \$4,775,559. This is an increase of \$275,679. However, if you take out the capital expenditure for HVAC, then the difference from FY24 to FY25 is -\$124,321.

What is driving these costs?

The primary driver of this increase is the cost of operating expenses, including staff salaries and benefits, which are contractual obligations. It is important to remember that our teaching staff went without raises for three years as part of the regionalization agreement, which artificially deflated overall budget increases. Special Education costs are also a factor. And, there are the rising costs to educate our children with current curricular materials, technology devices, etc.

What is the cost to run Tahanto in 2025? Is this more or less than 2024? Why?

In the FY25 budget, the cost to run Tahanto is \$12,138,972, of which the Berlin portion of the assessment for FY25 is \$4,040,480. That is an increase of \$179,748 from the FY24 Berlin share - \$3,206,381. Various increases in costs associated with paying salaries of teachers, special education transportation, and other cost increases as well as the need for an additional math teacher to meet new State graduation requirements.

What other services will be lost if the budget isn't funded?

Anything that is not legally required to run the district, execute our contracts, and remain accredited is likely to be lost.

Why is the budget we're being presented with one particular number, but we are voting on a different number?

The budget shows what we reasonably expect in running the school district to cost next year. It includes all of the "revenue" received such as State aid, grants, and transportation reimbursements net of all the expenses we will pay such as teacher salaries, supply costs, technology costs, transportation costs, etc.

The assessment is the number you will vote on. This represents the money that needs to be raised from town taxpayers and is the sum of what the State says we have to provide at a basic level (minimum local contribution) as well as those items in the budget that we provide above the minimum basic level, such as funding for sports, arts, and additional services that you've come to expect from public education in our schools, net of all other funding sources.

Where did the \$383,000 go that Scott Schultz, the Berlin Fincom Chair, keeps asking about?

The money that Mr. Schultz asks about is the additional cash the town of Berlin contributed to help cover a significant and unexpected special education expense. The School District also contributed extra cash to cover that expense. In discussions at the time it was hoped that this would be a short-term expense that would not need to be covered again in the following years. This is what people are referring to when they talk about not including that funding in future year budget calculations.

The funds in question were used, in part, to address the out-of-district placement needs while another portion was used to set up an on-site program for the students in question as well as other students with significant special needs. This program allows us to serve more students, keep those students in-district, and reduce overall special education costs. The funding was used to hire staff and buy needed equipment and furnishings for this program.

Why does the superintendent have to fire teachers on June 15? When will teachers whose jobs may be at risk receive that notice? How likely are they to wait on a resolution for a budget process that isn't decided on June 17th?

By agreement with the Berlin-Boylston Teachers Association, notice to affected teachers about a reduction in force (RIF) must be delivered by June 15 annually. No one is being fired, this is better described as a potential lay-off notification as we continue to work through the budget process.

I've heard that this June 15 date is just a scare tactic deployed by the school committee to trick us into voting for their agenda.

It's not. Simply go to the BBRSD.org website, type "contract" into the search bar, and read the teachers contract. Pay particular attention to Article 7 #3 on page 8.

Why is "Special Education Costs" all I hear anyone talking about?

School districts in Massachusetts have a duty to provide a quality education for ALL students, regardless of the individual's situation. We recognize that some students have additional challenges to overcome and require specialized services. These services often come with a high price tag, but we have a moral, and legal, obligation to ensure that no child goes without.

When our district cannot provide the necessary services it becomes necessary to send individuals to programs and schools that can provide these services, often referred to as "out-of-district placement." The tuition rates for these placements are set by the State and other public entities. In FY24 the costs for these placements increased by 14% and, coupled with the number of students requiring these services, there was a large projected increase to our budget last year.

In talks with the Berlin Finance Committee throughout the spring of 2023 it became clear that multiple members did not think the town should have to incur these costs, and it is unclear if they still do not recognize the requirement that the towns pay for these costs upfront.

While it could be a valid pursuit to lobby the State to change the way it passes along these costs in the future, the fact remains that towns must provide a quality education to prepare ALL students for a successful life after high school. The school committee and administration recognize this obligation and are working toward fulfilling this promise while making reasonable decisions to ease the burden to taxpayers.

What is the Bridges Program and how much does it cost? Why invest in this?

The Bridges program allows Berlin students with special needs to remain at Berlin Memorial School with their peer group and teachers. They are also closer to family, rather than attending an out-of-district school to receive their education which could be some distance away.

What is Circuit Breaker?

Two helpful links:

[DOE Circuit Breaker](#)

[Circuit Breaker Threshold and Reimbursement Rates](#)

The Commonwealth Special Education Reimbursement Program, commonly known as the Circuit Breaker Program, provides financial assistance to public school districts to offset the cost of delivering high-cost special education services to students.

Qualified expenses must exceed an annual per-student approved cost threshold to be eligible for reimbursement.

When deciding what must be cut from a school budget, why do cuts fall on Specials, Arts (at the ms/hs level) and Sports?

This is a good question and it goes to what is required in public education. When it comes to running a public school, there are certain subjects that MUST be taught as required by law. Those include subjects like reading, math, science, history, and physical education. Within these topics, there are minimum requirements in order to graduate, and there are other electives that a student might choose to round out a full schedule.

What cost savings are possible in the proposed budget for this year?

The Superintendent and Principals of each building have been working tirelessly throughout the year to find ways to save costs everywhere. What has been presented is their opinion of what the schools need to operate next year to efficiently keep up with changing graduation requirements, community requests to provide arts, and athletics, and create a robust school community. They also want to provide the same level of service our students have received in the current year, although they will be at next year's projected prices.

Putting together a budget is long difficult work, and involves a lot of estimating. Consider your own household budget. It's now June; many of us in town heat our homes with either oil or propane. You likely know how many gallons you'll use next winter, but do you know what the price will be to fill your tank in January 2025? The people working on this have done the best they can based on their years of experience in running schools to present a fair budget of what we can reasonably expect it to cost to operate our schools next year.

If we lose Specials at the elementary level, what will our student's day look like? How will learning in the subjects of art, music, technology, and health be accomplished? What support will classroom teachers have to integrate these things into their regular curriculum? When will classroom teachers have a break to plan (or use the restroom)?

Some of this material can be covered in mandated coursework, using technology to accomplish research goals, for example. Health would be addressed by the physical education teacher. Obviously, other learning opportunities would be missed. We would need to hire one or more paraprofessionals to

ensure that teachers are able to get needed breaks and preparation time. These positions would be hired at a much lower rate than the positions we have reduced, and that amount would be determined once we know what the final budget figure will be.

My child is NOT on an IEP or 504 but previously has accessed and used math and reading coaching. Will those services be available if the budget is not funded?

Many students in this exact situation have benefited from these services, especially since the pandemic. Those services may not be available if we are forced to remove the positions as a result of budget cuts.

If we lose technology as a class, how will our students learn to type? Use technology? And be able to take the MCAS on a computer? Won't this negatively impact the school's quality rating if their test scores go down because they can't complete the test on a computer?

Students will still be exposed to the use of technology in the classroom. What they will miss out on is the opportunity to more deeply explore the possibilities that technology offers.

The towns asked BBRSD to participate in the budget process last year. Why did BBRSD ignore this request and choose not to share the budget in a timely manner (3 days before the town budget goes to the warrant is not timely)?

This is simply not true. Historically the budget has been presented to the towns at the end of February after many conversations with the administration. The towns were first alerted to the potential FY25 budget needs in August 2023. Conversations took place throughout the year. The budget was in constant flux due to these conversations, changing information from the State, accepting that some things weren't possible this year and other needs changed as the year went on. An initial "above level" request of about \$2.5m was presented on October 24. Over the following months this was cut by \$2.3m to arrive at a budget on February 27. When presented and conversations took place, the schools cut an additional amount to arrive at a final figure at the budget hearing on March 19 that represents the bare minimum to operate BMS at the same level as it is today while adding only items needed to efficiently keep up with changing graduation requirements at Tahanto while all other services remain.

What caused the district to lose its Director of Finance?

This is an ongoing personnel matter. The district has an interim finance director from the firm TMS, Inc. and he has been working diligently on this budget.

What makes the line item budget so hard to share?

The line item budget has been shared. It has always been available to anyone who wanted to ask for it. In the past it has not been actively distributed because it is large, complex, and very specific, even for those with advanced accounting backgrounds. It has always been available to the public upon request, and now that you have it we welcome any questions you might have on where you think there can be additional cuts or cost savings.

How often did the BBRSD School administration/committee meet with the towns to discuss the budget? Why did I hear that the schools refused to meet with the towns?

See the schedule provided. There were three meetings or conversations in the summer/fall of 2023 with town officials at which time the budget and needs were discussed. August 18, September 20, October 24. In addition, there were 12 public meetings of the school committee at which the budget was discussed in detail. There were multiple additional conversations including phone and email between school administration and the Towns. There was ample opportunity for the finance committee and select boards to ask questions about and understand the budget needs.

In addition, Scott Schultz, chair of the Berlin fincom, met in the central office on May 23 with the Superintendent and the current interim finance director to go over the budget and attend a webinar presented by the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools regarding the regional school district budget process and overview of 1/12 budgets. Slides from the presentation have been distributed by the Superintendent. Mr. Schultz also spent several hours with the finance director asking questions and receiving answers for clarification of the budget.

We do not know why the town of Berlin has repeatedly said that the schools refused to talk with or work with them on the budget.

We recognize that the school committee and the Berlin finance committee do not agree on the final budget and needs of the district, but to claim there was a refusal to discuss the budget with the town is not accurate.

Path to the FY25 budget

Date	Action	People	Public meeting
September - December 2022	Discussion and approval of District Improvement Plan	Central Office, Administration, School cmte	Yes
July - August 2023	Department reviews, analysis, projections	School admin, central office	No, internal business work
Friday, August 18, 2023	Email initial budget assumptions for FY25 info to both towns	Finance Director to both town administrators	Email, available to public
August 2023 - February 2024	Ongoing discussion/phone calls	School central office / Berlin / Boylston	No, internal business work
Tuesday, September 5, 2023	School cmte budget sub committee public meeting	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte budget cmte	Yes
Monday, September 18, 2023	Formal invitation to Berlin and Boylston select boards and fincoms to join budget discussions at October 24, 2023 special school cmte meeting.	Email sent from: School cmte chair Totman To: Superintendent, Christine Keefe, Scott Shultz, Kristen Rubin, Jamie Underwood, April Steward, Eric Brose, Attorney Rozak, School Cmte Budget sub committee members	Email, available to public
Wednesday, September 20, 2023	School building tours, demonstration of needs, casual budget conversations	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School Cmte, school admin, various Town selectboard and fincom members including Mathew Mecum, Christine Keefe, Berlin town fire chief, building inspector.	Not public meeting, but invitation sent to both town admins, select board, fincom
Thursday, October 5, 2023	School cmte budget sub committee public meeting	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte budget cmte	Yes
Tuesday, October 10, 2023	School cmte meeting on agenda: Preliminary FY25 above level needs, expenses, general budget, capital budget, closing of FY23 budget	School committee, administration	Yes
Tuesday, October 24, 2023	School committee meeting with Berlin and Boylston town select boards, fincom	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte, Kristen Rubin, Cliff LaPorte, Mathew Mecum, April Steward,	Yes
Friday, November 3, 2023	School cmte budget sub committee public meeting	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte budget cmte	Yes
Friday, December 8, 2023	School cmte budget sub committee public meeting	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte budget cmte	Yes
Friday, January 5, 2024	School cmte budget sub committee public meeting	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte budget cmte	Yes
Tuesday, January 9, 2024	School committee public meeting on agenda: budget update	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte	Yes
Friday, February 9, 2024	School cmte budget sub committee public meeting	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte budget cmte	Yes
Tuesday, February 27, 2024	School committee public meeting on agenda: budget update, FY23 Audit presentation	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte, Powers & Sullivan LLC - District Auditor	Yes
Wednesday, March 6, 2024	School cmte budget sub committee public meeting	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte budget cmte	Yes
Tuesday, March 19, 2024	School committee public budget hearing	Superintendent, Director of Finance, School cmte	Yes

What does it mean to use a statutory vs alternative assessment method? If the budget vote goes to a district-wide vote (both Berlin and Boylston), why will it be a different amount for each town?

This refers to two different accounting methods/calculations for determining how much of the budget to apportion to each town, ie. how much will each town have to pay for schools. This is allowed by State law and was agreed to in the regional agreement.

Per the regional agreement between Boylston and Berlin, each town will pay 100% of its own elementary school budget and then pay a portion of the Tahanto budget. That portion is based on a formula that considers the student population percentage from each town. This is considered an “alternative” method.

This calculation has resulted in an assessment amount to Berlin of \$4.5m for BMS and \$3.5m for Tahanto.

The statutory method is a calculation that DOES NOT consider the elementary schools separately from the regional Tahanto building. State law requires that we re-calculate the town assessments with this method if we need to hold the district-wide meeting to pass the budget; this is not a choice we can make. This will also be the case if the budget does not pass at the special town meeting or the district wide meeting and we have to assume a 1/12 budget come July 1.

While this formula is more technical than we need to discuss in this FAQ (you can read it in the regional agreement [here](#)), it essentially requires adding up the budgets for all three schools, for the entire district, and then allocating that to each town based on student enrollment from each town.

Why? What drives the cost at BMS compared to BES?

Because of the long-standing tradition of funding the elementary schools separately even after joining as one regional district. Historically BES has been funded to a lower amount than BMS on a per-pupil basis. Now that the math will change with the statutory method, Boylston will in effect be subsidizing some of Berlin’s elementary schools. This is a result of years of decisions within the towns as to what was important to the voters at the elementary level.

Why didn't the SC and Superintendent not reach out to ALL district families well in advance of the town meetings to share that this was as much of a hardship as it has become?

The School Committee and Superintendent *did* reach out and make district families aware of the situation. While communication was sent out through the newsletter to all parents who have provided an email and agreed to receive this, this proved not to be the best or most efficient way to communicate such important information. We have found that parents and concerned townspeople are the BEST way to communicate information and we have worked diligently with them to find clearer and more accessible paths of communication. If you are reading this then that means we have begun to succeed here.

How can we trust that the district is using tax appropriated funds appropriately?

Audited financial statements are provided every year. The FY23 audited financials were presented by Powers & Sullivan, LLC on 2/27/24, along with their opinion as to whether anything nefarious happened. We are happy to email a copy of the report to anyone who would like it. If you think tax funds were used inappropriately in any way, please bring this to our attention and we will address it.