

New Hartford Public Schools
Board of Education Special Meeting (In-Person)
Ann Antolini Elementary School - Library
5:00PM on Tuesday, March 4, 2025

PRESENT: Superintendent Jeffrey Sousa; Chairman Timothy Klepps; Vice Chairman Thomas Buzzi

Board Members: Meagan Albert; Penny Miller; Erik Perotti; Frank Rodenberg; Timothy Russell and Deirdre Tindall

Board Members Absent: Kristin Young

Additional Present: Kelly Carroll; Amy Kennedy; Michael Lynch; Heather Mathes and Lou Helt (*Board of Finance*)

Chairman Timothy Klepps called the special meeting to order at 5:00PM.

A. Pledge of Allegiance

B. Order of Business

C. Communications to the Board of Education/Public Comment

D. Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Sousa gave the following updates:

- March 7, 2025, is Spirit Day, make sure you wear red
- March 11, 2025, is a follow-up budget workshop (Antolini 6:00PM)
- March 14, 2025, is early dismissal for Professional Development
- March 18, 2025, follow-up Board of Education - Regular meeting (Antolini 7:00PM)
- March 19-20 is 1:00PM dismissal for parent-teacher conferences
- March 27, 2025, is a Pre-school play group, screening day for new preschool students
- March 28, 2025, there is no school for students for Professional Development

2024-2025 Budget Status (Current Budget)

For the 2024-2025 budget year there have been significant unexpected costs which included: legal fees for the extended negotiations and a confidential student/family legal matter. The outplacement cost increased, which the district is unable to predict. There is a deficit due to the underfunded excess cost grant which was approximately \$40,000. Mr. Sousa noted a budget freeze has been put in place. The end of year deficit projection is -\$56,330 (short). The \$130,000 is a projection for the final cost of legal fees. Deirdre Tindall and Thomas Buzzi have requested a further breakdown of the expense appropriation between the two categories that make up the \$130,000.

E. Board of Education Chair's Report

Chairman Timothy Klepps thanked the members of the Board of Education for their volunteered time to the 2025-2026 proposed budget, especially for their time reviewing and asking questions on the proposed budget.

F. Routine Business

Expenditure Report

MOTION by Penny Miller to table the Expenditure Report until the next regular meeting on March 18, 2025. Second by Deirdre Tindall.

UNANIMOUS
Motion Passes

G. New Business

2025-2026 Budget Discussion and Action

The 2025-2026 Budget Drivers are Employee Salaries (Contractual Obligations), Employee Benefits (Health Insurance) and Pupil Services (Outplacement Tuition) which totals \$663,333, a 7.6% (this is out of the \$871,000 original request of 8.86% increase to the budget). Decreasing the budget increase below 7.6% would mean decreasing the number of employees. Other factors can be evaluated, but Mr. Sousa said the only way to cut beyond 7.6% would mean some individuals would not be employed by New Hartford Public Schools. Grant information can be found on Page 5 of the Superintendent's proposed budget. The 2024-2025 budget was underfunded \$40,000 and the amount is unknown for the 2025-2026 budget. The notice of receiving grants varies from summertime to the beginning of school. The Connecticut Junior Republic grant, which will not be received in the next budget year 2025-2026 is \$35,000, which includes one day of mental health support. The Excess Cost Grant is not always fully funded by the State of Connecticut, when they say they will. In the 2024-2025 budget, the percentage of the Excess Cost Grant was approximately 60% and it is expected that the 2025-2026 Excess Cost Grant will be 58-59%. The onset projection was \$130,000 but only \$87,000 has been received. The current budget is getting more conservative every year. Erik Perotti asked if there is a per pupil projection yet, noting that New Hartford has been the lowest in the region. Timothy Klepps summarized that the staff to student ratio in New Hartford is at 9:1, in line with Barkhamsted at 9:1 and Colebrook at 8:1. He also importantly noted the New Hartford Public Schools are providing Special Education to over 25% of the student population.

The goal for this meeting is to give directions to the Superintendent. Thomas Buzzi recommends Mr. Sousa bring the budget down to three different levels, such as 5.5%, 5% and 4.5%, to see where this leaves the line items. Timothy Russell agrees but suggests doing 4% and 5%. Erik Perotti expressed this would mean cutting teachers, therefore asked what the maximum class size is in New Hartford, the answer is 25:1. The average class size currently is about 17. Frank Rodenberg questioned whether a retirement incentive has ever been proposed in New Hartford, whether attrition is better than firing. Erik Perotti suggested removing Arrow Security to keep a teacher as the cost is very similar. Frank Rodenberg agrees with Erik Perotti, this idea needs to be kept on the table. Penny Miller has been on the Board for 12 years and doesn't recall any retirement incentives being discussed or offered. Frank Rodenberg would rather not hire someone new and retain those who are already employees of New Hartford Public Schools.

Erik Perotti noted the 4th grade sections next year have the same number of students as sixth grade. Mr. Perotti questioned if 4th graders could be condensed into 3 sections rather than 4. This would eliminate a section by increasing the class size to 21 students for 4th graders, mirroring sixth grade. Mr. Sousa said this can be evaluated, although he stated that New Hartford has pride in small classroom sizes. The current only employee grant funded is an ARPA school mental health specialist, when not funded the position would not be continued. This one individual funded at \$52,000 is still funded in 2025-2026 budget year under the same grant. Penny Miller questioned the Right to Read grant, which Sousa informed this grant is not for personnel, but rather for materials (\$23,000 used for workbooks as an example) is no longer funded in the 2025-2026 budget. Timothy Russell questioned the funds in the non-lapsing account, can this be used to decrease the budget? Mr. Sousa recommends not mixing budget years. There needs to be a conversation with the Board of Finance to do so. The account has \$115,000 approximately, until the auditors confirm the final number. Mr. Sousa suggests using the money from the non-lapsing account to cover the current budget year's deficit.

MOTION by Thomas Buzzi to direct Superintendent Sousa to give the Board of Education a proposed budget at three different intervals for consideration at 5%, 4.5% and 4%. Second by Timothy Russell.

DISCUSSION:

Frank Rodenberg questioned Mr. Sousa if it would be easier to come back with three numbers or just one number. Mr. Sousa stated he can take on two to three different percentages. Mr. Sousa feels if he “could present different scenarios that the Board would get an understanding of the cuts and their impacts for better understanding of the delivery, he is not opposed to two or three, outside of that would be a bit much”. Timothy Klepps clarified that Mr. Sousa will give a list of what cuts will be made to get to 5%, 4.5% and 4%. Timothy Klepps would like to start at 5.5%, taking out over 2%, Mr. Perotti agreed. Mr. Perotti asked what if Mr. Sousa is unable to get to the 5%? Penny Miller suggested looking at the historical data (Page 2 of the proposed budget) for the budget percentage increase in past years, most are 3.89% and under. Ms. Miller thinks 5.5% is unrealistic and would rather see 5% and go down from there. Deirdre Tindall brought to the attention of the members that the Board of Education cannot take a high percentage to the Board of Finance. Ms. Tindall expressed how difficult the cost of living is for many people; reality is the increase needs to be below 5%. Mr. Klepps noted the average increase across the state is 5%, there are needs within the school that need to be provided for the students. Penny Miller noted, the Board of Finance is not only the one who needs to approve the budget, the townspeople need to approve the proposed budget at referendum. Thomas Buzzi wanted to start at 5.5% but he made his motion to start at 5% because he doesn’t want to waste time. Ms. Miller agreed with Thomas Buzzi. The goal for this meeting is for the Board of Education to give Mr. Sousa a stopping point, he needs a target number or percentage to get to. Mr. Perotti asked if there was another place to cut the budget besides Education? Penny Miller stated the only other place is the town budget. Deirdre Tindall says the hard reality is the Board must make tough decisions, and it is unfortunate to cut staff, nobody wishes that. Ms. Tindall suggests getting creative to receive other funding that is not tied to federal/state grants and taxpayers, such as fundraising. Timothy Russell said he felt the same last year; he did not want to cut staff. He reminded Mr. Perotti it’s an impossibility when trying to get a budget under 5%. Frank Rodenberg expressed that long term the number of students in Special Education needs to be looked at, the percentage is much higher than other towns. Special Education is a big driver, and he realizes it cannot be fixed for this budget year but feels in the long run this issue should be addressed. Mr. Sousa has never seen the percentage of Special Education decrease; this is something that never trends the other way. Timothy Russell thinks incentivizing retirement is a good idea, he questioned, does Mr. Sousa know how many teachers would fall into this category? Mr. Sousa would need to conduct further research. Deirdre Tindall asked Mr. Sousa for a percentage of Special Education chart, like last year at the next meeting. Thomas Buzzi reiterated that 4% is deep, Mr. Buzzi wants people to see what 4% means to the school system.

Aye: Timothy Klepps; Thomas Buzzi, Meagan Albert; Penny Miller; Frank Rodenberg; Timothy Russell and Deirdre Tindall

Naye:

Abstain: Erik Perotti

(7-0-1)

MOTION by Chairman Timothy Klepps to see where the proposed budget is, at 5.5%. Second by Erik Perotti.

Frank Rodenberg questioned Mr. Sousa if any staff had been surveyed as to their interest in going part-time. The answer is no, staff have not been surveyed specifically about working part-time.

Aye: Timothy Klepps; Thomas Buzzi, Meagan Albert; Erik Perotti; Frank Rodenberg; Timothy Russell and Deirdre Tindall

Naye: Penny Miller

Abstain:

(7-1-0)

H. Public Comment - (For Agenda Items Only)

I. Adjournment

MOTION by Penny Miller to adjourn the meeting at 6:06PM. Second by Timothy Russell.

**UNANIMOUS
Motion Passes**

Respectfully submitted by,
Elizabeth Domas, Recording Secretary

Recorded Regular and Special Board of Education meetings will be posted to:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCX-ZlomWmiG81dc_QM3rfg

Attachments: (Filed with the Town Clerk and available upon request)

2024/2025 Budget Projections w/ Budget Freeze

2025/2026 Budget Drivers Contractual Obligations

2025-2026 Superintendent's Proposed Budget

<https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1741118423/newhtfdorg/dkhvrbwl8vbowmttxqa/2025-2026SuperintendentsProposedBudget.pdf>

BOE Questions & Comments - Revision 1 - 3/3/25

[https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1741118609/newhtfdorg/kqc0iouqqkyy6b1zs8q6/BOEQuestions Comments Responses022825-R103032025xlsx-Sheet1.pdf](https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1741118609/newhtfdorg/kqc0iouqqkyy6b1zs8q6/BOEQuestions%20Comments%20Responses022825-R103032025xlsx-Sheet1.pdf)