

Seymour Board of Education

Working Session / Public Forum (Budget) Agenda

Revised



March 31, 2025
Seymour Middle School
6:30 pm

Board Members Present:

Chris Champagne, Board Chairperson
Kristen Bruno, Vice Chairperson
Stephan Behuniak, Secretary
Pete Kubik
Lori Nespoli
Jay Hatfield
Kristen Harmeling
Jim Garofolo

Others in Attendance:

Dr. Susan Compton, Superintendent
Salvatore Bucci, Business Manager
Shannon Levey, Board Clerk
David Willadsen, Bungay AP
Keith O'Rourke, SMS Principal
Mary Sue Feige, Director of Curriculum & Instruction

I. CALL TO ORDER

A. Pledge of Allegiance - Mr. Champagne called the meeting to order at 6:33 PM

II. PUBLIC COMMENT

Public Comment provides the opportunity for the public to make a comment. It is not a dialogue between the Board and the public. Based upon what is heard during Public Comment, the Board may choose to add a topic to the agenda. If questions are posed that the Chairperson is able to answer, those questions may be addressed under the Chairperson's Comments portion of the agenda. The Board will not discuss personnel matters. Comments should be respectful and no longer than 3 minutes in length so that all who wish to comment may have the opportunity to do so. All the public wanting to comment will need to state their name and address for the record prior to addressing the Board.

- Quinn Levey, 47 First Ave.:
Commended the Board of Education, stating it is a solid board that will do the right thing and get the job done. Made an observation regarding the Town budget:
 - Noted that the "Education Block Grant" (Educational Cost Sharing – ECS) is listed as a line item in the Town of Seymour's budget, but not reflected in the BOE budget.
 - Estimated this amount to be nearly \$12 million.
 - Encouraged Board members to investigate where these funds are allocated and ensure that they are being used to support education.

III. PRESENTATION

The Board held a public presentation to review the proposed education budget. No action was taken during this meeting; the purpose was to present the PowerPoint and provide an opportunity to answer questions from the public. Mr. Champagne noted that many of the questions had already been addressed during previous BOE meetings but welcomed the opportunity to revisit them. He thanked Ms. Levey, Mr. Derrick, Mr. Bucci, and Ms. Harmeling for their contributions.

Presentation Overview

Ms. Harmeling opened the presentation with a brief introduction. She explained that one of her professional responsibilities is to tell factual, data-driven stories. She outlined the structure of the meeting:

- Meeting scheduled to end at 8:00 PM.
- The chat feature was closed during the presentation but reopened at the end for questions. The presentation would not cover the budget line by line, as that has been done in prior meetings, but questions about specific line items were welcome.
- Public is encouraged to email follow-up questions in the coming days.

Budget Development and Proposal

- The budget process begins in October and continues through January, starting with needs assessments from the building level.
- The proposed budget prioritizes student success—academically, socially, and emotionally.
- Original BOE Budget Request: 7.9% increase
 - Drivers:
 - Health insurance (initially projected at 20% increase)
 - Contractual salary increases
 - Inflation
 - Reincorporated shared services
 - 3 new mandated positions
 - Several extracurricular “appendix” positions
- BOF Reduction: Reduced to 5.9%
- BOE Revised Budget: 6.9% adopted to accommodate a 12% insurance increase
 - Still leaves a gap between allocated funds and actual needs

Ms. Harmeling emphasized that final cuts and reallocations will only be determined after the referendum vote. The budget remains fluid due to unpredictable variables and changing needs. She asked for the public’s trust as the process unfolds.

Proposed Advancements (Presented by Ms. Bruno)

Ms. Bruno reviewed several proposed advancements designed to strengthen programs and services:

- ELL Teacher
- Social Worker
- Pre-K Special Education Teacher
- Paraeducator for Pre-K
- School Security Officer (SSO)
- Elementary School Activities Coordinator
- Elementary Makerspace/STEAM Lab Upgrades
- School Climate Coordinator
- Math Advisor
- Track & Field Coaches

Ms. Bruno emphasized that public feedback is welcomed and appreciated.

Budget History & State Funding Context

- Using U.S. inflation data, the 2019 budget of \$33 million would need to be \$42 million today to keep pace. Current funding falls behind inflation, limiting opportunity growth.
- The State Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) funds (approx. \$11.9 million) go directly to the Town, not the BOE.
 - These are shown as town revenue, not BOE revenue.
 - All grants are included in the annual fiscal audit.
- The balance of school funding must be made up by local taxpayers.
 - School budget: \$42M

- Minus ECS: \$11.9M
- Local funding needed: \$30M
- 61% of school expenditures; 54% funded by local taxpayers
- The state's unpredictable and inconsistent funding shifts the burden to towns.
 - Special Education costs are particularly burdensome, e.g., a mid-year outplacement can cost \$80K–\$100K per student.

Student Achievement Highlights

Ms. Harmeling shared positive outcomes across Seymour Public Schools, including:

- Red, White & Blue Award winner
- AP Honor Roll
- Ivy League acceptance among applicants
- Admission to the U.S. Air Force Academy
- 23% workforce-ready graduates
- Chatfield-LoPresti School recognized as a School of Distinction
- Assistant Principal of the Year Award

She also referenced the School Badge of Academic Excellence, awarded only to schools ranking in the top 40% statewide, despite Seymour spending nearly \$2,000 less per pupil than comparable districts.

She cautioned against relying on sites like Niche.com, stating their methodologies are not valid or comparable to state-verified data.

B. Questions & Answers

Members of the public are encouraged to participate by submitting questions in advance or asking them live during the meeting via YouTube and Zoom.

- **Email:** BOEemail@seymourschools.org
- **YouTube Live Stream:** [Watch Here](#)
- **Zoom Meeting:** [Join Here](#)
 - **Meeting ID:** 840 2050 3612
 - **Passcode:** 9grV0K

7:15 PM Questions & Answers begin:

1. Budget Presentation and Clarifications

- **Mr. Champagne** asked **Mr. Levey** if the presentation addressed his question about Educational Cost Sharing (ECS).
- **Mr. Levey** confirmed it did but sought clarification:
 - He asked, "Does the BOE receive the nearly \$12 million since it appears in the Town budget, not the BOE's budget? So really, it's more like \$30 million for taxpayers, not \$42 million?"
 - The Board confirmed that was correct.

2. Public Comments and Questions

- **Paul Sponheimer, 25 Falcon Dr.:**
 - Commended the presentation.
 - Emphasized the importance of public awareness that the effective taxpayer burden is \$30 million, not \$42 million.
 - Highlighted the achievements of Seymour students, including Ivy League acceptances that are sometimes declined due to financial constraints.
 - Noted the strength of vocational and trade offerings at Seymour High School.
- **Theresa Conroy, 177 Skokorat St:**
 - Requested easier access to the budget document on the Town's website.
 - The Board agreed to ask the Town to post it online.
 - Mr. Champagne reiterated uncertainty regarding how to manage the proposed 5.9%

budget increase.

- **John Lombardo, 31 Union St.:**
 - Praised the teachers and staff.
 - Suggested exploring creative cost-saving strategies, including expanding shared services.
 - Questioned a surplus noted in the BOF budget for the BOE.
 - Mr. Champagne: Indicated the surplus is incorrect.
 - Mr. Bucci: Explained budget management practices.
 - Municipal budgets reflect expenses based on checks issued, not obligations.
 - No ongoing \$100,000 surplus exists monthly.
 - Yearly goal is to stay within budget while managing unexpected costs, such as the School Security Officer.
 - Mr. Champagne added that the budget is transparent with line-by-line breakdowns.

3. Staffing and Program Questions

- **Shared Services:** Mr. Lombardo proposed expanding them.
- **Staffing Updates:**
 - No social worker was added last year.
 - Inclusion facilitator position continues in the current budget.
 - Impact of eliminating positions was discussed.
 - Attendance officers now serve under 092 certification at \$10,000 for oversight.
 - Positions eliminated over recent years include:
 - 2 custodians
 - Secretary
 - Media specialist
 - Full time Athletic Director
 - Assistant Superintendent
 - Assistant Principal
 - French teacher
- Dr. Compton thanked parents and community members for continued support.

4. Facilities, Curriculum, and Operational Questions

- **Bathroom Monitoring:**
 - 2 restrooms in the cafeteria previously non-functional are now fixed and monitored.
 - Electronic hall pass system is in place and functioning well.
- **Curriculum Vetting:**
 - Programs such as IXL and Ed Vision are selected by the Director of Curriculum and a team of staff and parents.
- **Student Transiency:**
 - Approximately 20% of students are transient.
 - 22 students have arrived from other countries.
 - The district serves over 21 different language populations.
- **Out-of-District Placements:**
 - 26 students projected next year (similar to 27 this year).
 - All associated costs, including transportation and tuition, have increased.
 - Valley superintendents are in discussions on regionalizing services to reduce costs.
- **Monthly Student Reports:**
 - Dr. Boyle provides monthly updates on student progress and intervention needs.
- **Budget Cut Planning:**
 - If full funding is not received, reallocations will occur in June based on evolving needs.
- **Teacher Salary Clarification:**
 - The listed \$141,000 salary includes compensation for a math teacher who also serves as Athletic Director, coach, and department chair.

- **092 Certification:**
 - This is an administrative certification.
 - Ms. Harmeling noted many certified staff hold 092 and are offered leadership opportunities within the district.
- **Heating at CLS:**
 - CLS uses geothermal heating, resulting in minimal heating costs.
 - Ms. Bruno emphasized the long-term benefits of investing in school infrastructure.

IV. REPORTS

A. Board of Education

1. Chairman Comments

2. Board Member Comments

Ms. Harmeling addressed the topic of shared services, clarifying that while the public may commonly hear about the three shared positions between the BOE and the town, the district collaborates beyond that—such as in areas of energy and health insurance. She emphasized that the Board actively looks for cost-saving opportunities through collaboration with the town. However, she also noted the difficulty in clearly defining what constitutes an educational vs. non-educational expense, stating, “It’s really tough to draw lines in the sand,” and the Board remains cautious but supportive of shared services when appropriate.

Mr. Behuniak commented on community discussions, including those on social media, stating that Board members deeply consider the impact of every budget decision. He highlighted that the Board hasn’t had the opportunity to propose a truly progressive budget in a long time and expressed pride in doing the best possible with limited resources. He commended the administrators and staff, describing them as instrumental in achieving great outcomes despite financial constraints.

Ms. Bruno provided perspective on budget processes across the state, noting that Connecticut’s 169 school districts approach budgeting in many different ways. Seymour has a unique and highly citizen-involved process, with public participation through meetings and referendums. She acknowledged the cuts already made by the Board of Finance and encouraged residents to get involved and be vocal about their priorities—especially when voting. She asked community members to share the reasons behind their votes, whether yes or no.

Ms. Nespoli shared her positive experience touring the schools, particularly Seymour High School. She was impressed by the unique programs offered (e.g., medical, CAD, robotics), which were made possible largely through grant funding. She noted that obtaining grants is not easy and praised the administration for thinking outside the box and securing resources that many schools do not have. She encouraged the community to visit SHS to witness firsthand the value of these programs.

Mr. Strumello spoke as a CABE (Connecticut Association of Boards of Education) representative, along with Mr. Hatfield. He discussed their advocacy efforts at the state level, particularly around special education costs, emphasizing the need for state regulation on how outplacement organizations set prices. He urged the public to engage with local legislators and ask, “What are you doing to control educational costs at the state level to help towns like Seymour?”

Mr. Bucci shared data showing that Seymour’s cost per pupil is \$2,743 less than the state average, yet the district continues to achieve strong results. He emphasized that students are leaving the district well-prepared for success in society.

B. Superintendent's Report

Dr. Compton expressed deep pride in the district's educators and staff, stating, "This is where the rubber meets the road." She recognized the dedication of teachers, paraeducators, nurses, custodians, secretaries, and administrators who go above and beyond every day. Despite operating below the state average in per-pupil spending, the district continues to deliver high-quality education and services. She noted that the Board of Education office operates with a minimal staff and budget, yet the district remains focused on doing what is best for all students. Dr. Compton encouraged grandparents, alumni, and residents to take pride in Seymour Public Schools, emphasizing that the district consistently puts students first and achieves outcomes that are not commonly found in other districts. She highlighted the importance of sharing the district's story with the community and thanked everyone for their continued support. Dr. Compton also noted that the district is preparing for a strategic planning process and encouraged the community to stay engaged. She closed by thanking Ms. Harmeling for her hard work in preparing the evening's budget presentation.

V. ADJOURNMENT

Meeting adjourned at 8:03 PM

Prepared by Shannon Levey,
Board Clerk