

Board of Education Regular Meeting
Suffield High School Library Media Center
March 17, 2025

Call to Order

Board Chair Sattan called the meeting to order at 6:34 p.m.

Present: Board members Debra Dudack, Melissa Finnigan, Brian Fry, James Mol, Gianna Rossi, Maureen Sattan, Michael Sepko, and Greg Sparzo (via Zoom); and Superintendent Matthew Dunbar (via Zoom), and Business Manager Eric Remington

Absent: Sam Toskin

Prior to the start of the meeting, Board Chair Sattan welcomed the Boy Scouts who were in attendance working on their Citizenship in the Community merit badge.

Julie Haefner, Suffield High School Family Consumer Sciences Teacher, presented the Board of Education members with several delicious treats that had been prepared by her culinary students in recognition of Board of Education Appreciation Month. She thanked the Board of Education for their continued support of the program.

Discussion/Action Items

A. Discussion and Possible Action on Fiscal Year 2026 Budget

Board Chair Sattan said that the Board had reviewed the modified Superintendent's budget at the last meeting, but no action had been taken. Business Manager Eric Remington reviewed the proposed Board of Education budget summary. The original Superintendent's proposed budget increase of 8.34% had included the reduction of three certified positions. The revised proposed budget total of \$42,275,929 reflects a 7.03% increase over FY25, however the district expects to factor in an additional \$175,000 in a pass-through special education reimbursement from the town, which will bring the effective budget down to \$42,100,929 or a 6.59% budget increase over FY25.

Adjustments made to reduce the budget include: the elimination of two additional certified positions, one non-certified position, an anticipated reduction of special education outplacement costs, an expected increase in state reimbursement for excess special education costs, the elimination of the Board of Education's membership dues with CABE (Connecticut Association of Boards of Education), and various other reductions in operational costs. Budget drivers were reviewed including a 20% health insurance premium increase for next year, which accounts for 2.16% of the overall budget increase. In addition, special education outplacements represent 1.38% of the overall budget increase and salary increases from contractual agreements represent 3% of the overall budget increase.

Superintendent Dunbar discussed the proposed elimination of the Suffield Middle School Library Media Specialist position. He said the library will remain open with current materials accessible to the students. Some library services may be restructured using existing district staff and the position could potentially be restored in a future budget cycle.

Board Chair Sattan said she, Superintendent Dunbar, Mr. Remington, and Board of Finance Liaison Brian Kost had a call earlier in the day to discuss any final BOF input. Kost had indicated that a recent OPEB (other post-employment benefits) funding update is expected to provide some financial relief, depending on updated projections.

MOTION #25-44: Fry moved to approve the 2025-2026 Board of Education Budget as presented, without the proposed elimination of the Suffield Middle School Library Media Specialist position, in the amount of \$42,381,628 which is an increase of \$2,884,240 or 7.3%. Mol seconded the motion. Fry, Dudack and Mol voted in favor. Finnigan, Rossi, Sattan, Sepko and Sparzo voted against. The motion failed **3-5-0**.

Board members shared various viewpoints related to the proposed reductions and the current financial climate. Board members requested clarification about the OPEB impact. They noted that the final decision on the magnitude of school funding lies with the Board of Finance and ultimately the town voters, but that the Board of Education defines how that money is to be spent.

MOTION #25-45: Finnigan moved to approve the 2025-2026 Board of Education Budget as presented in the amount of \$42,275,929 which is an increase of \$2,778,541 or 7.03%. Rossi seconded. Dudack, Finnigan, Rossi, Sattan, Sepko and Sparzo voted in favor. Fry and Mol voted against. The motion passed **6-2-0**.

B. Attendance Report

Superintendent Dunbar thanked Principal Anthony Hibbert and Assistant Principal Matt Dobi for their contributions on the Suffield Public Schools Attendance Data presentation. He said the focus is on chronic absenteeism and discussed why attendance matters. The overall district attendance rate is 94% on a daily basis. Suffield remains above the state average in attendance but there are areas of concern. Attendance definitions, attendance policies, year-to-date attendance, and attendance trends were reviewed and discussed. Superintendent Dunbar reviewed chronic absence numbers by grade for the current school year and compared those to rates in nearby towns and our District Reference Group. He mentioned that intervention strategies have been developed, including home visits, attendance contracts, and increased parent communication.

Principal Hibbert and Assistant Principal Dobi shared an update on the high school. Principal Hibbert said the high school is strengthening parent and student engagement by providing frequent communication to address attendance concerns before they become chronic issues. The school is providing personalized outreach for students identified as chronically absent, including one-on-one meetings with administrators and individualized attendance plans. He said supporting students through the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and engaging curriculum helps address attendance issues. Assistant Principal Dobi reviewed the attendance policy and risk of credit loss. He said attendance is critical, particularly for students who struggle

academically. He shared concerns that without direct intervention, many of these students may not graduate on time. Many students are missing school due to mental health challenges, family responsibilities, or disengagement from learning. Students are aware of the attendance policy and are taking steps in the right direction. Superintendent Dunbar said the district is taking a close look at how attendance is measured. He appreciates the efforts being made by high school administrators to address the issue and thanked the Data Ad-hoc Committee for suggesting this review.

Greg Sparzo exited the meeting at 8:02 p.m.

Board members discussed the process of capturing attendance, the timing of attendance letters, and the number of absences allowed before a student is considered chronically absent. Board members discussed credit loss as it relates to absenteeism, the utilization of the School Family Liaison and the attendance reporting system.

Adjournment

Fry moved, Mol seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:16 p.m. All members voted in favor.

Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of April 7, 2025.

Respectfully submitted,

Debra Dudack
Secretary