

PARK RIDGE BOARD OF EDUCATION

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

Date: March 18, 2025

Public Started: 6:00 P.M.

Public Ended: 7:25 P.M.

High School Cafeteria

I. Roll Call

C. Amitrano	R. Fisher	J. Pierotti	N. Agoos	R. Browne	D. Bradler
X	X	A	X	X	X

Also Present:

R. Gamper R. Wright A. Zartarian

Swearing In of New Board Member

Mr. Wright swore in Dr. Thomas Monahan as a Board Member with a term to expire in the year 2025.

Roll Call

T. Monahan	C. Amitrano	R. Fisher	J. Pierotti	N. Agoos	R. Browne	D. Bradler
Y	Y	Y	A	Y	Y	Y

II. Pledge of Allegiance – was led by Board President, David Bradler.

III. Open Public Meetings Statement was read by Board President, David Bradler.

This is to advise the general public and to instruct that it be recorded in the minutes that in compliance with Chapter 231 of the Public Laws of 1975, entitled the "Open Public Meetings Act," the Park Ridge Board of Education on February 12, 2025, caused to be posted at the Office of the Board of Education located at 85 Pascack Road, Park Ridge, New Jersey and on February 12, 2025, sent to The Record, 1 Garret Mountain Plaza, P.O. Box 471, Woodland Park, NJ 07424-0471 and The Ridgewood News, 41 Oak Street, Ridgewood, NJ 07450-3805 and on February 12, 2025, delivered to the Office of the Municipal Clerk of Park Ridge and the Park Ridge Public Library a meeting notice setting forth the time, date and location of this meeting.

IV. 2025/2026 Budget

The Superintendent and the Park Ridge Board of Education recommends approval to adopt the Tentative Budget for FY 2025-2026:

SM 031825

BE IT RESOLVED that the tentative budget be approved for the 2025-2026 School Year using the 2025-2026 state aid figures and the School Business Administrator/Board Secretary be authorized to submit the following tentative budget to the Executive County Superintendent of Schools for approval in accordance with the statutory deadline:

	<u>GENERAL FUND</u>	<u>SPECIAL REVENUE</u>	<u>DEBT SERVICE</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
2025-2026 Total Expenditures	\$ 39,493,251	\$ 489,452	\$ 778,209	\$40,758,912
Less: Anticipated Revenues	4,498 503	489,452	265,914	5,253,869
Taxes to be Raised	\$34,994,748	- 0 -	\$ 512,295	35,507,043

And to advertise said tentative budget in the Record in accordance with the form required by the State Department of Education and according to law; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Park Ridge Board of Education includes in the final budget the adjustment for increased costs of health benefits in the amount of \$425,050. The additional funds will be used to pay for the additional increases in health benefit premiums.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that included in the general fund appropriations, budget line 620 is a withdrawal from Capital Reserve – Other Capital Projects in the amount of \$1,300,000 for other capital project costs. The total cost of these projects are \$1,300,000 which represents expenditures for construction elements or projects that are in addition to the facilities efficiency standards determined by the Commissioner as necessary to achieve the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that a public hearing be held at the Park Ridge Board of Education located at 85 Pascack Road on May 6, 2025 at 7:00 p.m. for the purpose of conducting a public hearing on the budget for the 2025-2026 School Year.

The Board discussed the resolution to submit the budget to the County. Mr. Wright reported that the Finance Committee met and reviewed several budget options. Based on that review, a tax levy increase of 3.25% was being recommended. Mr. Wright indicated this was possible due to a waiver allowed by the State for Health Benefit increases above 2%. Mr. Wright then reviewed what new information has been received since that meeting. In addition to a State Aid increase of \$96,604, the Board also lost \$12,804 in Federal funds. Mr. Wright followed up by commenting that additional Special Education costs have arisen which amount to \$217,340. Mr. Wright then explained that he was able to keep the tax increase at the proposed 3.25% even with this additional information.

Mr. Wright was asked if the approval of this resolution amounted to agreeing to the budget. Mr. Wright explained that the submission was not for the adoption of the budget, nor could it be used

to adopt the budget. It was being done to facilitate a technical review by the County. Mr. Wright explained that this process consisted of them verifying that there was support for certain key numbers such as salaries and benefits. The deadline to do this was March 19th. Mr. Wright further explained that failure to do this by that date would result in being out of compliance with State law.

Mr. Monahan commented that he had reviewed the budget line items and found instances that appeared to show the budget could be reduced. He asked to have those budget lines reviewed for areas that can be cut.

Mr. Amitrano commented that he noticed there was a large increase in medical benefits and asked why it was going up. Mr. Amitrano also questioned the vocational tuition costs and teacher salaries. He asked about a stipend for E-Sports of \$6,000, indicating that it seemed high.

Ms. Browne responded that E-Sports was up and coming in a lot of districts and that Park Ridge wants to be competitive. With regards to the health benefits, those costs are controlled by the State.

Mr. Fisher mentioned that Inflation for February was 2.8%. He felt Mr. Amitrano and Mr. Monahan both brought up good points. The objective is to get the best education at the lowest price. He could tolerate a minimal increase if we were a stellar school district but indicated that Park Ridge was not. He stated that we typically rank least competitive among our peers according to US News. He said that he randomly chose 5 schools, and we had the lowest graduation rate among them. We also had the lowest percentage of students taking the AP tests and the lowest passing rate. He commented that there was no point in paying extra for a budget when we are sub-par compared to the rest of the County. He commented about admission into better schools and that Park Ridge students were not getting into them. He did not feel students were getting a quality education.

Dr. Gamper questioned the source of Mr. Fisher's comments. He stated that the information he receives is direct from the College Boards and they did not align with the comments he made. When he questioned Mr. Fisher about how many AP classes he took while at Park Ridge, he received a response of "4."

Mr. Bradler commented that he did not understand the rationale behind cutting the budget for a school district that was considered sub-par. He thought the opposite would be the case.

Dr. Gamper also questioned equating success with enrollment in an Ivy league school. He questioned how many students have even applied to them.

Mr. Fisher then proposed a resolution to have Mr. Wright and the Finance committee come up with an alternate budget at or as close to a zero percent increase as possible to be submitted within a 30-day time period. Ms. Agoos agreed to meet with Mr. Wright to do this.

The resolution was voted on and passed as follows:

M: RF S:CA

TM CA RF JP NA RB DB

Y Y Y A Y N N

The Board then voted on the resolution as presented. The resolution passed as follows:

M: RB S: CA

TM CA RF JP NA RB DB

Y Y Y A Y Y Y

V. Hearing of Citizens

Hearing of Citizens will be restricted to three minutes per person. The Board bears no responsibility, nor will it be liable for any comments made by the public. Please be advised that all comments are maintained as a matter of public record.

Ms. Brickman asked that Board policy be adjusted so that a Board member should serve on at least one committee. She then commented that she has been a para-professional for a number of years over which she has assisted teachers, tied shoelaces and wiped tears caring for kids. She has gained the trust of teachers and parents. She commented that paras do more than anyone realizes, and teachers rely on them. Since they are not unionized, they rely on the Board to provide a living wage. She asked that the Board not cut their positions or their salaries. She then commented that she has two boys involved in the theater program. She said that they have developed confidence and created friends as a result. While other districts are spending money to improve their space, our stays the same. She asked that the program be treated like others and to consider the Theater when doing the budget.

A parent, Chris, commented that it was not just the theater that uses the space, the band uses it as well. There are other activities that take place in that space including the National Honor Society and sports awards. The parent stated that the backstage area is disgusting and suggested the district hire a cleaning company to take care of it. The parent then said that they chose to move to Park Ridge because of the schools. They found it reprehensible that a Board member would consider it "sub-par." They also found it insulting that some Board members do not contribute the same as others. She felt it should be required. They also pointed out that not all Board members pay taxes.

Ms. Shelby commented on the conversation the Board had on the budget. She stated that the budget is not the talk of the town, and she does not hear this from fellow citizens. The real discussion is on the lack of paraprofessionals and increasing class sizes. She stated she was happy to throw more money at the issue to get the education they deserve.

Mr. Brickman pointed out that the people who were here tonight were there to make sure that the Board does not lower what they already have. He mentioned that he has a son going to college who is going to be a Senior. He has to pay for that. He considered the costs when making that decision. He also pointed out that he did not go to Harvard but still has a great job and makes good money. He felt that if you want to have a better school, you will need to pony up and pay.

Ms. Minuto expressed concern about the disparity in class sizes at East Brook vs West Ridge. She indicated that the differences are significant and puts East Brook school at a disadvantage. Smaller class sizes allow students to receive more individualized instruction. She indicated that research supports that students do better in small classes. She pointed to a 2011 review that concluded that reduced class size improves long term outcomes. She was concerned that in some

areas, East Brook students are not meeting expectations and are substantially falling behind. She felt the reason for this was class size. It puts more demand on the teachers, and they can spend less time with students. She urged the Board to improve the comparative difference between schools and add additional classes.

Ms. Dow, a resident and teacher, explained that she is looking for parity. She stated that Park Ridge is not just a good school, but a great school. Even though students are not going to Ivy League schools, there are several who have full rides to honors schools. They chose those schools above selecting other options. She also pointed out that trade schools are also successful. She stated there is so much more to Park Ridge and it was wrong to use an arbitrary metric as measurement. She pointed out that the theater community offers great support and that everyone looks out for each other.

Mr. Brickman stated he is a student at Park Ridge High School. His experience at being part of the theater program made him feel accepted and he developed a sense of community and made friendships. He asked the Board to do more to update the theater facilities.

Ms. Edwards stated that she has three girls who graduated. All have succeeded but none went to Ivy League schools. She felt the community needs to invest in the Park Ridge schools. The amount of the tax increase is something you spend on Amazon in second. She felt that if you cannot invest that in this community, you should not be on the Board of Education.

Ms. Hollers stated that she has three children in the schools. She felt cutting the school budget was a terrible idea. The district would lose the ability to attract top candidates and the schools would suffer. She stated that while the tax burden is high in Park Ridge, the schools have performed well, receiving a top 10 ranking in NICHE for Bergen County schools and setting the standards for educational excellence. Park Ridge, despite being a small town, offers an impressive range of options for students and provides a nurturing educational environment. She felt that the opportunities offered allow students to excel beyond the classroom.

A resident, who was a former teacher, did not agree with cutting the budget. She felt that it did not make sense to take funding away if the reason was that the schools were underperforming. She felt that the elimination of clubs or programs was collective punishment. Instead, she pointed to an ulterior motive. That the request to cut the budget was designed not to improve it but to weaken the school system. She pointed out that the requests being made align with ultra-right wing groups with the intent to weaken public education system. Underfunding will not create better outcomes. Ultimately it is designed to devalue the schools to the point where they can exert their ideological control. She found it insulting that there were Board members who were doing this and not being honest about their intent. These individuals had no children in the district. She felt they are manufacturing a crisis in an effort to weaken the public school system.

Ms. Jansen expressed concern about class sizes at East Brook vs. West Ridge. She stated that she has a 1st grader and there are 21 students in the class. Some of those students have behavioral issues. She did not feel the students were receiving enough attention to meet their needs. She felt students needed more reading help. She pointed out that there were smaller class sizes at West Ridge. She asked the Board to look into making this more equitable between schools.

Ms. Adele stated that she was very shocked at what occurred tonight. When she moved, she actively sought out Park Ridge because of the school system. She stated that her children have done very well here. Elite schools are not needed to succeed. College choices are made based on the child and family situation. She pointed out that elite schools often have people coming out owing a lot of money. She stated her son would be graduating this year. She praised the offerings at the High School saying she particularly liked the class on managing money. She commented that you should not take away from others because you disagree. She stated that she was passionate about the theater program and pointed out that many other groups use that space. She hoped the Board would consider that when making decisions on what to do with that space.

A resident commented that people need to be more involved and pay attention. She did not want to have rock bottom pricing when it comes to the school system. She stated that she is prepared to pay more taxes and wants to make sure things move along and continue as they are. She indicated that she was not looking for cuts.

Ms. Dury was appalled at the incident that occurred at the local church. She wanted to know which Board members were affiliated with the Mom's for Liberty group. She felt they should be ashamed as well.

Dr. Gamper gave an update on the Little Theater. The Board has interviewed new architects. They met with them and walked around the Little Theater where they took pictures. Next, they will meet with parents and get ideas. Eventually, they will bring in the staff and drama director. The concerns that were being raised at the meetings are not falling on deaf ears. He asked the residents to read the newsletters which will have updates on the Theater.

Ms. Dow thanked Mr. Fisher for his letter and appreciated the support after the church incident. She stated that she is incredibly proud of the work the teachers are doing. She stated that you cannot cut from the classroom as many of the teachers pay for things now out of their pockets. She also stated that the teacher's pay was also not competitive with the private sector and not sure how much longer she can afford to keep teaching.

VI. Adjournment – 7:25 PM

M: RF S:CA

TM CA RF JP NA RB DB

Y Y Y A Y Y Y

Robert Wright
Business Administrator/Board Secretary