Remote Merrimack School Board Special Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Tuesday, January 5, 2021

Present: Chair Guagliumi, Vice Chair Barnes, Board Members Schneider, Rothhaus, and Hardy. Also present were Superintendent McLaughlin, Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell, and Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Fabrizio.

1. Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance

Chair Guagliumi called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Chair Guagliumi led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Guidelines for Public Participation for Remote Meeting

Chair Guagliumi stated public comments could be sent to publiccomment@sau26.org or by going to sau26.org where a meeting link was provided. She said all comments would be read and written into the record but noted the name and address of the speaker had to be provided.

3. Public Participation

There were no public comments to be read.

4. Formal Hearing on Student Services Budget

Ms. Heather Barker, Student Services Director, addressed the Board and said the accounts in the Department of Student Services were essentially child-specific and contained the cost for existing students in their current placements with related services, and special education transportation as determined by their IEP (Individualized Education Plan) teams. She said the services and costs may fluctuate depending on the severity and the number of students that were served in any given school year. She added the proposed budget reflected an increase of approximately 2.1% due to contractual increases for related services due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for significantly longer ESY (extended school year) programs for the students and any compensatory education costs incurred as a result of the pandemic.

Ms. Barker said the proposed budget sought to provide the same level of services as in prior years and ensured that they remained in compliance with all of the IEP services for those students with educational disabilities.

Question

If the budget for the SEP/Paraeducator/Charter School amount is for one paraprofessional at a charter school, how is the increase attributed to the increased student enrollment at charter schools?

Answer

This was a typo. Over the past school year, we have had several students placed in charter schools who required paraprofessional support and the same will be required in the 2021 – 2022 school year.

Question

Understanding the reasoning for the increase in the tutor line item, ESY (Extended School Year) should we anticipate a sustained increase in this budget item because of the length of time the pandemic impacted progress?

Answer

Over the summer, after COVID hit in March, we had great success in bringing students into the school and we plan on offering that again this coming school year. The line items were increased by 50% because we would have the opportunity to make headway with students who did not have access to live direct instruction.

Question

Overall, can you describe the increase in summer programs? It seems to impact many areas of the budget. Please review what is individual vs. program-based.

Description	Increase Amount
SEP/PT/OT/SPEECH	+$256K
Related/Elementary	+$149K
Related/Middle	+$184K
Related/ High	+$192K
SEP Asst./Tutors/Contracted	+$239K

Answer

This is not related to summer programs. The PT (physical therapy,) OT (occupational therapy,) and speech therapy lines are for the next school year and that increase is a direct result of what we expect to be an increase in cost for those services.

Question

In your summary, you described the increase in areas such as an extended year and the higher cost of contracted services. The items in this section seem to reflect the lion's share of these increases. It would be helpful if you could share more details on the increases here, especially in the areas where contracted services are either more expensive than before or purchased from different providers than previously. Also, if you could share how other districts are addressing this, and whether there are any economies of scale by working collaboratively with other districts to benefit from.

Answer

The bulk of the interest in cost is directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the inability of students to be able to access direct face-to-face special education services from their special education teachers and related service providers. We do anticipate an increase in cost as we are planning a larger summer program and we are very much in line with what other area school districts are doing.

Within the past year, we have become members of the South Central Collaborative which is a group of Special Education Directors and we have been working with SERESC (Southeastern Regional Educational Service Center) in terms of how we can bundle some of the psychological services and neuro-psychological services.

Question

Given the change to more remote instruction, and looking ahead to future years, are there any changes in approach to providing services that would require additional equipment that's not normally been forecasted?

Answer

We have typically used this line item to purchase devices that support students with vision, hearing, or mobility challenges. We were able to purchase technology and devices with no problem in past years and I did not feel we needed to increase the line item.

Question

Is it still necessary to have tutoring for homebound/hospitalized regular education students given we have a full remote learning option?

Answer

Students who are homebound or hospitalized typically have a medical or psychological medical need and they may not be available at the time the regular class is. They may also attend the regular class remotely but in addition to that, they need further instruction.

Question

I have heard a lot of confusion from taxpayers regarding the need for audiologists, neurologists, ophthalmologists, and other specialists. Can you explain why these positions are needed?

Answer

The IEP team drives what gets incorporated into the plan. Students sometimes need those experts for evaluation, consultation, and in some cases, direct services. They are also federally and state-mandated.

Question

If enrollment of special education students in charter schools has increased, why is there no increase in the cost of special services to students in charter schools?

Answer

Although we have had students in charter schools over the past several years, many of those students lived close to the local schools and we were able to provide them with special education at no additional cost.

5. Formal Hearing on Merrimack High School Budget

Ms. Sharon Putney, Principal; Mr. Rich Zampieri, Assistant Principal; and Mr. Peter Bergeron, Assistant Principal were present to discuss the proposed budget.

The Merrimack High School proposed budget for the 2021 – 2022 school year was essentially level-funded. Decreases in some supply accounts were due to the purchase of online resources, especially in English and Language Arts. Some items purchased in the previous year were not utilized due to remote instruction during COVID-19. We saw two content areas with priorities for the coming school year and made necessary reductions in order to fund them, they were mostly in the areas of English and Language Arts and Science.

Question

The computer education repairs in 2019 – 2020 expended is dramatically under the budgeted amount, while the administrative equipment repairs for the same period spent is dramatically over the budgeted amount. Can you share insights into these two categories and why the discrepancies in budget vs. expended?

Answer

The actual amount spent on computer education repairs should have been listed as $22,691 so it was a typo. The non-instructional administrative equipment $13,077. The computer education account does provide the maintenance repair for those computers and equipment not on warranty and the administrative equipment repair account provides maintenance and repairs for all computers, printers, peripheral computer equipment, and the managed service through Conway.

Question

If the Computer EDU repairs line item is used for actual computers and not items such as printers, please advise as to how additional devices purchased are being supported by level funding. If it is consistent with the other schools and copiers, etc., I am satisfied with the account as presented.

Answer

This account is created to provide maintenance and repairs for all computers and equipment that are not on the warranty.

Question

Regarding athletic practice transportation, how much are students using the transportation provided? Are we requiring its use vs. carpooling with other students in their cars?

The budgeted amount continues to trend downward over the past three years. Is this due to the actual usage/needs as observed over the periods, or for some other reason?

Answer

We never want students to carpool to go to practice. We do provide transportation to practice and many of our students do use the buses. There was no spring season.

The downward trend is due to usage. This will continue for soccer, cheer, and track in the winter.

Question

Regarding co-curricular transportation, considering the usage by the time the pandemic hit in March was $61,445, why is this line item being projected lower next year? You are asking for $75,000 vs. $81,250 from last year.

The budgeted amount is reduced from the previous two budget years. Is this reduction due to the actual reduction in usage (beyond the COVID impact) or for another reason?

Answer

Since we instituted the co-curricular transportation account line item we have been extremely grateful. While we have never expended all of the money in this account, but there is always a chance that we could use all of the money because from year to year we don't know where some of the competitions might be and how the teams might do in the state and regional competitions.

After reviewing the budget we decided we could cut back, not only on some of our teams that compete nationally but some of our clubs as well.

Question

Obviously, COVID caused a significant reduction in what was expended in 2019 – 2020. However, the budgeted amount for 2021 – 2022 is 10% less than the budget amount for 2020 – 2021. Can you provide details as to the reduced budget amount in the MHS Athletic Officials account?

Answer

We wanted to place some money into a coaches educational fund but Mr. Mike Soucy, Director of Athletics for the District feels that we can get that with the NHIAA (New Hampshire Interscholastic Athletic Association) courses and he is also updating the coaches handbooks which will include a Code of Ethics. That is where we were able to have a decrease in that particular account.

Question

I see costs associated with the scoreboard and/or announcers. Who are we paying to do this and why does the rate differ between sports?

Answer

It depends on the scope of the job for each sport. For example, there is less to do while running a scoreboard during the running time in games such as soccer, field hockey, or girls' lacrosse. It has been difficult filling these positions and we don't always have volunteers.

Question

Given the 2021 – 2022 budget amount for School Improvement (Decennial Accreditation visit) is the same as it was for the 2020 – 2021 budget, is this because the visit has been pushed out by a year (and as such won't be spent during 2020 – 2021,) or is this a second additional cost?

Answer

It is because it's been pushed out for a year. Our decennial visit is now scheduled for the spring of 2022.

Question

Why is there an increase for the 504 Coordinator? (New hire that is higher on the pay scale?)

Answer

This position went full-time in 2021. The guidelines for the Title IIA grant that helped pay for the position changed and it now had to be used for education and training purposes. Beginning in 2021, we started to absorb the additional monies for the 504 Coordinator.

6. Formal Hearing on the District Budget

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell stated the proposed administrative budget was approximately $1.2 million higher than the previous year or a 1.45% increase. He said it was also $31,000 less than the default budget. Further, he said one of the major drivers of the increase was a 9.5% increase in health insurance or $499,000, and the New Hampshire Retirement rate had increased.

Assistant Superintendent for Business Shevenell commented that the District finished paying off the bond for the addition of the high school in the year 2000 which saved $295,000 as well as savings in the interest of $44,916.

Question

I fully understand and support the rationale behind the REAL (Remote Education Academy for Learning) Coordinator role. That said, there are no budgetary items other than the salary associated

with the program's operations. I would be interested in learning more about the costs for those students enrolled. In my opinion, the students who are enrolled in REAL should be extracted from their school's cost and be placed into the REAL budget. I would also like to know of the students enrolled, did they come from one of our buildings, a conversion from homeschooling, or a transfer from a charter school. Tracking that type of student data will better allow us to support programs to make that platform strong and sustainable. The number of students by grade would also be of great value. Considering what you have now are pandemic-related enrollments, I acknowledge this data may be more difficult to compile for the upcoming budget and be accurate representations of long-term participation.

Answer

This is a new position and at the moment the way they had budgeted for remote learners was to continue to see them as part of their home school so the cost for students was embedded in the budgets of each of the schools from which they came.

In almost every case, the students who were enrolled in remote have been our own students. We have not seen a lot of conversions yet from charter schools, or from homeschooling. We have 648 students enrolled in full-time remote learning.

Question

Recognizing that the budget was developed without approved vaccines, I applaud this item being included in the budget. However, now that we have a likelihood of vaccination coverage by the time the next school year starts, can we see if this amount is still needed to the tune of $100,000? Are there standards/best practices that this equipment will justify even if we are operating in a post-pandemic environment?

Answer

There are some unknowns. The mass vaccination may or may not happen by next fall. The requirement that all students and staff be vaccinated before they are let into our facilities is unknown. The items in the line will not be purchased prior to having a discussion with the School Board and get approval to spend the money.

Question

Although I agree to not budget Charter School Transportation due to historical lack of usage, can you provide the potential unanticipated costs should families elect to accept this transportation from the Merrimack School District as required by law? Should it be $1.00 in case?

Answer

If we could not accommodate transportation for a student on a regular route, which is usually the case, it would be approximately $40,000 but we zeroed it out because there was not a history of it being needed. The line could be kept in. If we needed it we would still spend it even though it is zeroed out.

Question

As we have expended more than the budgeted amount for the last few years on legal services, can we re-budget using a three-year average or the highest in the last three years so we are closer to an actual? It is as much about financial transparency as it is for reflecting accurate budgeting.

Answer

Ten years ago we spent $20,000 and the next year we spent $68,000. The year after that we spent $32,000 and then $41,000, $43,000, $53,000, $40,000, $71,000, $51,000, and this past year it shot up to $90,000. The ten-year average was approximately $51,000 and we are budgeting for $50,000.

Question

The amount budgeted for Unemployment Compensation dropped significantly from 2019 – 2020 to 2020 – 2021, and then again when moving to 2021 – 2022. Can you share why these are ramping down?

Answer

The unemployment rate has basically gone down over the past few years because it's based upon our own experience. Generally, unemployment, prior to COVID, in the field was at a record low. WE have a guaranteed rate for the years 2021 – 2022 from New Hampshire Primex.

Question

Can you provide more detail about the Transportation line item, specifically why the budget is flat from last year, and how it relates to the reduced use during 2020 – 2021? Are there any other opportunities for savings in this area?

Answer

We will be negotiating a contract extension or we will be going out to bid. For 2021 – 2022 we will use the same number as 2020 – 2021. There were no opportunities for savings.

Question

Regarding contracted services for the SAU office, is there an expended value for 2019 – 2020 that we can see to ensure the budgeted amount is accurate for what we are spending? It seems to be missing from the budget summary.

Answer

This line item covers PowerSchool, the emergency calling system, the Human Resource employment processing services system, and fund accounting and support. The budgeted amount was $218,699 and the expended amount was $218,659.52. This will remain level-funded for 2021 – 2022.

Question

Can you provide a little bit more detail surrounding the enrollment trends?

Answer

Enrollment can be tricky, especially in kindergarten and 1st grade. The previous year four additional teachers were requested at the elementary level but then COVID hit the previous March which clearly had an impact on enrollments. The District will plan for a year with numbers like the numbers anticipated the previous July.

Question

What are the ratios of students and teachers for the upper elementary school, the middle school, and the high school?

Answer

At the middle school, and the high school there was an average class size of approximately 25 students per class, however, there were a few classes that had 27 or 28. The high school proved to be more difficult to talk about as there were multiple cross-sections of classes, state-mandated class size, especially in science labs. Most of the core classes which were English, science, social studies, and math had between 23 and 25 students.

7. Public Comments on Agenda Items

Vice Chair Barnes commented that no public comments had been received.

At approximately 8:46 p.m. Board Member Rothhaus made a motion (seconded by Vice Chair Barnes) to go into a non-public session pursuant to RSA 91-A:3, II (a) (b) (c)

The motion passed 5 – 0 – 0 by a roll call vote.

At approximately 9:05 p.m. Board Member Hardy moved (seconded by Board Member Rothhaus) to adjourn.