Merrimack School Board Meeting
Merrimack School District, SAU #26
Town Hall – Memorial Room
January 17, 2023

Present: Chair Laurie Rothhaus, Vice-Chair Lori Peters, Board Member Jenna Hardy, Board Member Naomi Halter, and Board Member Ken Martin. Also present were Assistant Superintendent for Business Matt Shevenell, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Amy Doyle, and Chief Educational Officer Olsen.

1. CALL TO ORDER/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chair Rothhaus called the meeting to order at approximately 6:00 p.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

3. BUDGET PRESENTATIONS

a. Student Services

Director of Student Services Heather Barker and Director of Student Wellness Fern Seiden presented the student services budget.

Director of Student Services Barker reported a 3.5% increase in the 2023-2024 student services budget due to the increased costs for placements, contracted related services and the increased number of students receiving special education and the related services. The pandemic led to an increased number of students being referred and difficulties with hiring of staff.

Chair Rothhaus asked how many students attend the summer programming. What is the goal of the program and did we do an evaluation of the program?

Mrs. Barker responded last summer the program was open to all students not just those students with severe regression in learning. Last year the program serviced 206 students in the Extended School Year (ESY) Program.

Mrs. Barker reported formal piloting of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs were introduced last summer.

Ms. Seiden reported $3,280 was added to the student services budget to provide for an increase of two staff members for the summer programming to accommodate additional students next year. Last summer 32 students in grades K-8 participated in summer programming. Another 34 students received targeted transitional supports. All Extended School Year programs, Title 1, GET SET and 8.5 programs received push-in supports. She also reported positive feedback from parents and staff regarding the K-8 programming.

Chair Rothhaus asked how many staff members we are short at this time.

Mrs. Barker responded coming out of the 2020-2021 school year going into the 2021-2022 school year there were as many as five open MTA special education teaching positions. Most of the open positions were filled, a couple remained open all year. Outside services were contracted to provide specific special education services. She reported all MTA contracted special education positions are filled for this year.

Mrs. Barker reported all paraeducator positions in the three K-4 elementary schools are full. There are two open paraeducator positions at JMUES, 5 open paraeducator positions at the middle school and several at the high school. She noted the open paraeducator positions are in the more intensive needs programs and outside vendors have been contracted to fill that need.

Mrs. Barker highlighted ongoing and successful efforts to provide students with the intensive needs support needed in District rather than outside placement. She noted more students can benefit from the contracted services within the District. Her preference is to hire and train district personnel for the intensive needs programs.

Vice Chair Peters asked for clarification on the $13,000 increase in the SEL budget.

Ms. Seiden responded the increase is due to an upgrade to the curriculum used in grades K-4 and the purchase of an SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) universal screening tool.

Vice Chair Peters stated she is very supportive of social and emotion curriculum in the classroom. She reported in 2020 CASEL updated the second step curriculum. It is specifically and overtly inclusive of critical race theory elements. She expressed her support for the 2011 version of the CASEL curriculum. She suggested maybe adding existing elements from the current curriculum, or a review of Frendzy curriculum, which is similar to the 2011 CASEL curriculum. She wants the community to stay as unified as possible and does not want to blindside parents who may object to those portions of CASEL's additions to the program.

Vice Chair Peters questioned why the psychology testing service budget doubled?

Mrs. Barker responded there was an increased in the number of referrals and number of students in special education needing triennial evaluations and/or psychology services. Nine hundred (900) hours of neuropsychology services with a contracted service provider were added to the high school budget line due to an increase in the number of requests for outside neuropsychological evaluations. A contracted person will allow for fewer outside evaluations and a quicker turnaround time rather than waiting 12 to 24 months for an outside agency.

Vice Chair Peters asked if Mrs. Barker would agree that the significant number of students needing services is primarily due to the pandemic.

Mrs. Barker reported the current fourth grade class has a large number (30%) of students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) with reading deficiencies.

Mrs. Doyle explained the reason for two additional fifth grade teaching positions is to support next year 's fifth grade students.

For the benefit of the community, Chair Rothhaus noted that the addition of two teaching positions is not due to an increase in enrollments, but rather to support next year's fifth grade students with support in reading.

Board Member Hardy asked for more information on the $60,000 for the contracted Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) services.

Ms. Seiden responded an increase in need for mental health prevention and early intervention supports at the high school. Examples include at-risk students, support for students with substance abuse needs that are interfering with education, supports for students in crisis or adventure-based counseling program.

Mrs. Barker explained last year's budget included contracted services for SEL programs. That need is currently being provided by a district employee. She noted that not all students in need of social and emotional learning programs will have an IEP (Individual Education Plan). Eric Mann from SERESC will be working with students in the K-12 PASS program. Mr. Mann will also be working with the SEL providers to align supports and services to provide families and students with similar experiences as they advance through the system.

Board Member Halter asked why the amount spent in 2021-2022 was so high?

Mrs. Barker responded the increase was an anomaly due to non-violent crisis intervention (CPI) licenses that lapsed during the pandemic. This account will be used to re-train the trainers who will re-train staff to bring licenses up to date.

Board Member Halter asked for clarification on the budget for tuition for students in grade 12.

Mrs. Barker responded a small number of students will continue in the 18 to 22-year-old program. Their services and programming have been accounted for in the budget.

Board Member Halter asked what does "Costs Submitted for Special Education Aid" mean?

Mrs. Barker responded the school district submits meticulous special education costs that exceed a mandated threshold per the State of NH. The State of NH returns a percentage of that money spent back to the district, formerly known as catastrophic aide.

The cost to the district for implementing the student's Individual Education Program (IEP) during the preceding school year must exceed 3.5 times the estimated state average expenditure per pupil.

Mr. Shevenell explained he estimates the amount of the return from the State as an estimated revenue on the revenue side of the budget.

Board Member Halter asked what associations and organizations are you a member of?

Mrs. Barker responded Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), New Hampshire Association of Special Education Administrators (NHASEA), Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), New Hampshire School Administrators Association (NHSAA), Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), New Hampshire Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (NHASCD), and Global Schools Leadership Alliance (GSLA).

Board Member Martin did not have any questions regarding the student services budget. He clarified for the public that reading recovery support is a priority and is supported by the student services budget.

Vice Chair Peters noted Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) support is needed for academic recovery.

Board Member Martin explained the budget reflects the needs right now and it will ultimately pay back dividends in the future.

Board Member Hardy stated the pandemic has had multiple effects on students that we are seeing now. The District has many supports and plans that will serve the students well.

b. Merrimack High School

Principal Claire presented the Merrimack High School budget. He reported an overall increase of less than 10% with many level funded items. The budget reflects increases and decreases in some line items to categorize expenses into the correct accounts. He provided an overview of each department's budget.

The Board expressed appreciation to the high school administration for how they supported the students and staff following the loss of a high school student.

Chair Rothhaus asked for an update on the proposed 4 by 4 block schedule. This would align with the school board goal of increasing graduation rates. It would also offer a savings to the school district.

Mr. Claire responded a scheduling team has been meeting monthly since the summer to create a proposed schedule. He provided a brief overview of the team's work and stated a proposal would be submitted for review soon.

Chair Rothhaus asked how class size is determined at the high school.

Assistant Principal Zampieri responded the various department heads and the guidance department review class enrollment numbers and determine what classes will be offered. Staff availability and certification are considerations. Student safety and the state requirements drive the number of students per class. Currently there is only one class with 30 students.

Chair Rothhaus asked how many students have a 504 plan. Does the high school work with the middle school to align the transition of 504 plans? Who oversees the compliance of the 504 plans?

Mrs. Doyle responded currently the 504 coordinator is a contracted service position working with middle school and high school students. The 504 coordinator position is included in the proposed budget as a new position within the guidance department. There are approximately 200 students with 504 plans at the high school.

Chair Rothhaus asked how many students are taking advantage of the career and technical programs? How do we advertise these programs? What do we presently do to make sure all students have this opportunity?

Mr. Claire responded 10 students attend programs at Nashua High School North, 16 student attend programs at Nashua High School South and 31 students attend programs at Alvirne High School in Hudson. Students have an opportunity to visit the programs, submit an application for a program. Program participation is determined by the receiving school. The guidance department regularly promotes the various programs in private conversations with students.

Board Member Hardy suggested the vocational programs be shared with parents through the high school email distribution list.

Chair Rothhaus asked if the various career and technical programs accept only a certain number of students from Merrimack in their programs?

Mr. Claire responded yes and that student safety and maximum class size were factors.

Vice Chair Peters asked if the demand for participation in vocational programs was higher than the number of students accept.

Mr. Claire responded yes.

Chair Rothhaus asked who is responsible for co-curricular supplies?

Mr. Claire responded Assistant Principal Hanlon, who was unable to attend the meeting, is responsible for the budget line. All requests were funded last year.

Chair Rothhaus asked why one sport receives more funding than another sport that is similar, example baseball and softball.

Mr. Claire responded baseball has a higher budget because they must wear caps, per New Hampshire Interscholastic Athletic Association (NHIAA). Softball does not have that requirement. There are three baseball teams compared to one or two softball teams.

Chair Rothhaus stated last year she was assured that all teams are treated fairly and equal. Why do we rent space for some programs and make other programs pay for pre-season use through fundraisers?

Mr. Claire responded all teams are treated equally. Soccer balls are more expensive than lacrosse balls and are replaced more often. Space is rented for only those teams that cannot practice onsite or use a town facility. Bowling, swim, alpine ski, ice hockey and indoor track require rental space. Rental space for soccer is needed for home games only, not practice, during the months of August and September only to preserve the high school field. All home games are played at the high school beginning October 1st.

Mr. Claire will have a conversation with Athletic Director Mike Soucy regarding rental space needs for the lacrosse team.

Chair Rothhaus asked how the district determines the need for new textbooks and what is the rotation.

Mr. Zampieri responded that there is no set rotation plan and online support is not available. Additional biology textbooks are needed; however, the current books are not available to purchase. The new textbooks will be a class set with an online component.

Vice Chair Peters asked why we are purchasing so many hard copies of the English novels when the software has all the texts we would want?

Mr. Zampieri responded the online program did not have all the novel titles required by the English department. It was decided to reduce the budget for the online program and use the savings to purchase lost books and purchase new contemporary novels.

Chair Peters asked is there a systematized uniform replacement schedule at the high school like there is at the middle school?

Mr. Claire responded uniforms are replaced every 2-5 years. Replacement uniforms for football are the only uniforms in the budget. All other replacement uniforms are provided by the patrons.

Vice Chair Peters asked why is the social studies field trip budget significantly higher?

Mr. Zampieri responded last year a U.S. History class offered a field trip to all students. The cost of that field trip was more than the budgeted amount. More students will participate in additional field trips next year to support the required civics exam.

Vice Chair Peters requested in the future that adjustments between line items be reflected in the supporting paragraph of the budget book.

Board Member Hardy asked why scoreboard and announcers are paid and not volunteer roles.

Principal Claire responded current scoreboards require technical training prior to operating.

Board Member Hardy asked what is the police detail for at football and basketball games and why is that cost so much higher for basketball than football (when it looks like it is the same number of games)?

Principal Claire responded that the police attend the events for safety. There are fewer football games than basketball games.

Board Member Hardy asked how the $16,000 budget for co-curriculars is divided up between all the various non-sports clubs/co-curriculars that run at the high school?

Mr. Claire responded that Assistant Principal Hanlon would have the answer to this question.

Board Member Hardy spoke to the inequitable funding between sports and co-curricular activities within the district. Mrs. Hardy hopes that will be address in future budgets.

It was noted that students in the band program receive a penalty if they are absent from band to participate in a sports event that conflicts with a band event. All agreed that situation needs to be reviewed.

Mr. Claire responded new equipment for the Little Theatre is being purchased this year with money from the high school improvement account.

Mr. Zampieri stated Assistant Principal Hanlon is the administrator for co-curricular activities and Ms. Hanlon plans to ask the clubs what they need and to let them know that they can ask for items they need.

Vice Chair Peters stated a drama teacher does not fall within the fine arts department. She supports future conversations about what a fine arts department looks like and what it includes.

Board Member Halter noticed some classes are purchasing new equipment and others are not. Is there a rotation cycle for items such as calculators, headphones, flash drives, etc.

Mr. Zampieri responded that math and science departments each asked for one class set of graphic calculators.

Board Member Martin asked what equipment are you looking to replace in the weight room?

Mr. Claire responded frayed cables in one of the weight machines. It is a safety issue.

Board Member Martin supports the purchase of new drums for health and safety issues.

c. Districtwide

Mr. Shevenell explained that the district portion of the budget approximately $30 million dollars consists of contractual obligation, retirement incentive, testing and scoring, contracted services, support staff improvement, contracted services for software, advertising, audit, legal services, transportation, health insurance, New Hampshire retirement, dental insurance, and debt service. He noted the bond for the middle school would be paid off next year.

Mrs. Doyle explained iReady would be used to meet the Board's goal to maximize student learning, identify and systematically fill learning gaps. iReady will replace STARR and other tools.

Mrs. Doyle also noted comprehensive professional development will accompany the implementation of iReady.

Vice Chair Peters asked for an estimate for ongoing costs for iReady after the initial investment.

Mrs. Doyle responded approximately $100,000.

Vice Chair Peters explained iReady monitors ongoing progress that will help all students.

Vice Chair Peters asked many teachers resigned or retired since August 2021 and how many have been hired?

Chief Educational Office Olsen responded 55 teachers resigned or retired, 40 teachers were hired, 4 vacancies remain.

Board Member Halter asked what is the transfer to food service for?

Mr. Business Shevenell responded food service is a special revenue fund and self-supporting. Moneys received from the state are equal or greater than the food service expenditures. In the event of a food service deficit or if there is a need to purchase equipment, money could be transferred through this account.

Board Member Halter why we spent so much on legal services in 2021-22? Are we looking to be closer to the budgeted amount this year?

Mr. Olsen responded legal services can vary greatly from year to year. Much of the costs are special education related.

Board Member Halter asked for clarification on Sup Staff Improvement, Program Prof Staff 3.1A, Workshops/Undergrad 3.1B, and Graduate Studies 3.1C. What are they spent on, and why were they so underspent in 2021-22? Are we looking to be closer to the budgeted amount this year?

Mr. Shevenell responded the amounts are contractual professional development accounts. The reason for the underspending was due to the pandemic. Those amounts can only be changed during negotiations.

Board Member Halter asked what the School Board Contingency was used for and why are we cutting it?

Mr. Shevenell responded during covid years he put $100,000 in that account in the event funds were delayed getting to the district. He will not continue to use that line.

Board Member Martin reported all his questions were answered.

4. PUBLIC COMMENT ON AGENDA ITEMS

There was no public comment on agenda items.

5. ADJOURNMENT

At approximately 8:45 p.m. Board Member Martin made a motion to adjourn. Board Member Halter seconded the motion.

The motion passed: 5 – 0 – 0.