

S.C. MINUTES

Hoosac Valley Regional School Committee
School Committee Meeting
Monday, March 16, 2026 - 6:30 p.m.
Hoosac Valley High School, Resource Center, 125 Savoy Road, Cheshire, MA

PRESENT: John Duval, Robert Tetlow, Fred Lora, Tracey Tierney, Adam Emerson, Jen Solak

ABSENT: Erin Milne

OTHERS: Aaron Dean

104434 **Call to Order**
Vice Chairman called the meeting to order at 6:30pm

104435 **Approval of Minutes - February 9, 2026**

MOTION: On Motion of Fred Lora and second by John Duval
VOTED: To approve February 9, 2026 meeting minutes. The vote was unanimous.

104436 **Report of Superintendent**
A. **Budget Hearing - School Committee review Preliminary FY 2027 Budget**

Superintendents Overview

The Superintendent provided an overview at the start of the budget meeting, noting that considerable time had been spent reflecting on the challenges and narratives surrounding the school system, some accurate and others not, in order to present a clear perspective for the budget discussion. It was stated that the fiscal year 2027 budget presents multifaceted challenges, including increasing student needs requiring specialized services, a shortage of qualified professionals to meet those needs, and rising associated costs. Specific examples include the high cost of out-of-district special education placements and the need to expand in-district specialized services for incoming students. It was emphasized that these challenges are not burdens but reflect the broader reality that school systems are often overwhelmed by increasing demands and limited financial and human resources. Additional cost drivers identified include insurance, school choice, and charter assessments, which are largely outside the district's control.

The Superintendent further explained that, in response to evolving student needs following the pandemic, the district has made significant adjustments, including restructuring programs due to staffing shortages, implementing new programming, and developing systems within schools to address rising student anxiety and mental health needs. The district is also addressing unprecedented deficiencies in literacy and math through the implementation of high-quality instructional materials. While acknowledging the district is not perfect, it was noted that substantial efforts have been made to support students' academic and social development. Strong partnerships with some families were highlighted, though barriers to collaboration with others can create challenges and place complex expectations on schools to manage difficult situations while meeting legal requirements. These realities must be considered in annual budgeting and planning. Despite concerns about fairness, the district remains committed to overcoming these challenges to support all students. The Superintendent concluded by emphasizing that the district continues to provide strong educational opportunities and should not be defined by its challenges, which are not unique to the community.

Good News

The Superintendent shared positive highlights, noting a successful weekend for student activities. The boys' team was recognized for an outstanding run, with particular praise for their sportsmanship, hard work, and growth over the season, as well as for representing the district with class. The theater program's production of *Willy Wonka* was also commended as a strong performance. Additional accomplishments included cheerleaders qualifying for Western Massachusetts, unified basketball participation, and continued student engagement across programs.

It was emphasized that the district is making strong progress despite challenges, with ongoing investments in student opportunities and support. Key areas of focus include innovation career pathways, high-quality instructional materials, professional development, and expanded multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). Efforts in mental health planning, instructional leadership, curriculum-based assessments, and dropout prevention—particularly for special education students—were also highlighted. Continued work in literacy, early education partnerships, specialized programming, and student-centered initiatives reflects a commitment to implementing research-based practices. While acknowledging the district is not perfect, it was noted that meaningful progress is being made in the right areas to support student success.

Budget Story

The Superintendent outlined the initial budget context, noting that special education costs have increased by 22%, consistent with trends across the state due to rising student needs and escalating service costs. It was highlighted that out-of-district placements have seen significant tuition increases, with one example rising from \$67,000 to \$120,000 without a transparent approval process. Additionally, 10 student placements during the year required approximately \$200,000 in unplanned staffing costs, primarily for one-to-one support to meet IEP requirements. For the upcoming year, out-of-district costs are projected at approximately \$1.3–\$1.6 million for 10–12 students.

Other major cost increases include health insurance rising by \$351,951 and charter/choice assessments increasing by \$437,813, contributing to a level service budget increase of \$1,579,735 (6.83%), bringing the total proposed budget to \$24,716,371. The Town of Adams assessment would increase to \$6,710,982 (up \$752,779 or 12.63%), and the Town of Cheshire assessment to \$3,358,474 (up \$361,831 or 12.08%), placing significant strain on local communities. While Chapter 70 funding increased by approximately \$351,000, it was noted that the formula does not adequately support rural districts.

Rural communities face limited ability to raise taxes due to stagnant growth, unlike more urban counties, resulting in structural funding challenges. Declining enrollment does not proportionally reduce costs, as staffing requirements remain consistent; for example, a 300-student school generates \$993,000 in funding, while a 200-student school with similar staffing needs receives approximately \$300,000 less. The district is also increasingly drawing from reserves to maintain services, a practice that is not sustainable long-term. It was noted that growing demands in mental health, special education, and student supports continue to drive costs, requiring difficult decisions as the district works to close ongoing budget gaps.

It outlined required staffing reductions and reallocations to address the budget gap, noting that attrition was prioritized where possible. Reductions include a school adjustment counselor (through retirement), an elementary library/media position, a middle school STEM position (offset by shifting a shared music position fully to the middle school), a special education coordinator (with duties realigned), and a high school secretary reorganization. These changes result in an overall reduction of \$362,000.

Additional cost shifts include moving positions to alternative funding sources, such as reallocating \$176,000 due to grant limitations on lead teacher funding, with temporary reliance on school choice funds and a potential legislative earmark pending. Other shifts include positions moved to rural aid and school choice, totaling approximately \$514,000. Despite these changes, it was emphasized that these are key roles and difficult decisions.

Adjustments to student support structures include eliminating a high school adjustment counselor through attrition and restructuring the RESET program into a shared middle/high school model with a coordinator and paraprofessional. Administrative restructuring was considered but not pursued due to workload and compliance demands. Ongoing challenges related to the district's grade configuration (grades 4–7 and 8–12) were noted, with consideration given to future review.

At the elementary level, increased needs in the Bridges program (projected 15 students, above the cap of 12) will require additional staffing to avoid significantly higher out-of-district placement costs, estimated at \$600,000 compared to a \$215,000 in-district investment. The Superintendent concluded by noting ongoing staffing shortages in special education and the need to balance limited resources while maintaining student support services.

Principals Budget Process

Principals described the budget process as highly stressful and reviewed multiple times, noting it involved ongoing adjustments based on available funding, student needs, and building-level data. They emphasized that the work is collaborative, emotionally challenging at times, and centered on making the best possible decisions for students.

At the elementary level, leaders highlighted strong progress in early literacy and math instruction, driven by professional development, curriculum alignment, and coaching models in science of reading and new math programs. Pre-K students showed strong benchmark performance, and efforts are underway to extend these practices into K–3. At the same time, significant increases in student social-emotional and mental health needs were noted, with high daily support demands on staff and response teams. Rising enrollment pressures in specialized programs, including Bridges, were also identified as a key concern requiring additional staffing solutions.

At the middle school, administrators reported increased enrollment and large class sizes, particularly in grade 4, and emphasized the importance of the RESET program in supporting student behavior and emotional regulation. They noted the emotional and operational strain of considering reductions that would increase workload across grade levels. Continued implementation of developmental design practices and consistent schoolwide language have improved student support and reduced disciplinary incidents, including declines in in-school suspensions and emergency removals. However, high rates of behavioral referrals—especially in grade 8—remain a significant challenge impacting instruction and staff capacity.

At the high school, leaders highlighted strong growth in career pathways, with increased student participation and expanded internship opportunities. Improvements were also noted following external review feedback, showing significant progress in instructional practice and school culture. Ongoing challenges include high behavioral needs in grade 8 transition patterns, frequent classroom disruptions, and attendance concerns. Despite this, staff continue to expand individualized scheduling and experiential learning opportunities to support graduation and postsecondary readiness.

Across all buildings, principals emphasized continued focus on meeting diverse student needs through instructional innovation, behavioral supports, and flexible programming, while acknowledging significant staffing and resource constraints.

The revised budget totals \$23,990,355, representing an increase of \$853,719 (3.69%), effectively cutting the prior increase nearly in half.

Under this budget, the Town of Adams assessment is \$6,169,351, an increase of \$211,148 (3.54%), and the Town of Cheshire assessment is \$3,174,989, an increase of \$177,446 (5.92%). It was noted that if the proposed five-year averaging amendment had been approved, it would have further stabilized and leveled town assessments by smoothing year-to-year fluctuations between communities.

The Superintendent stated an intention to continue pursuing the amendment process through upcoming town meetings, with potential implementation in FY28, which would help reduce volatility in future budgets. Despite ongoing discussions with town officials, the Superintendent indicated this budget represents a necessary and workable plan with no additional feasible reductions identified.

Business Manager FY27

The Business Manager reviewed the FY27 budget line items, emphasizing that most changes reflect personnel shifts, contractual increases, and reallocations of funding sources rather than new program expansions.

Revenue assumptions include a \$375,000 increase in Chapter 70 aid, updated charter tuition reimbursement based on 72 charter students, transportation reimbursement aligned with reduced bus costs, and continued use of E&D funds for capital projects at no cost to towns. Debt service increased slightly by \$2,000.

On expenditures, the budget reflects staffing changes due to retirements, resignations, and reassignments, including additions of paraprofessionals at the elementary level and shifts funded through school choice, rural aid, and grants. Substantial portions of staffing—particularly in special education, preschool, and instructional support roles—are funded through revolving accounts, grants, or outside sources.

Instructional areas show mostly contractual increases and staffing realignments, including reductions and shifts in media/library, STEM, and exploratory programming, as well as reallocation of positions between curriculum, pathways, and instructional departments. Special education shows significant restructuring, including increased reliance on in-house speech services, RBT supports, and grant-funded positions to reduce costly contracted services.

Out-of-district special education tuition remains a major driver, with \$635,000 funded in the operating budget and total projected costs of \$1.3–\$1.6 million, supplemented by circuit breaker and school choice revenues. Administration also noted increased advocacy for higher circuit breaker reimbursement (targeting 90%) and concerns about structural underfunding in Chapter 70 formulas.

Non-instructional areas include modest increases in utilities, insurance, retirement assessments, and technology costs, while transportation reflects a 3% contract increase in the final year before rebidding.

General administration shows major increases in school choice and charter assessments due to 130 choice-out students and 72 charter enrollments, along with rising health insurance (8.75% active, 16% retiree) and a \$21,000 increase in retirement system costs.

Overall, the Business Manager noted that the budget reflects significant effort to reallocate funding, maximize grants and revolving accounts, and reduce the impact on town assessments, which were lowered substantially from earlier projections through reductions and funding shifts.

School Choice/Charter Impact

There are currently about 130 school choice-out students, down from 147 last year, showing a gradual decline. The district also has about 42 school choice-in students, up slightly from 37, and roughly 10 tuition-in students in district programs.

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the financial impact of school choice and charter-related costs. Approximately \$1.3 million, or about 5% of the total budget, is directed out of the district each year before funds reach classroom instruction. These costs include mandated tuition, charter assessments, and other required out-of-district placements.

Committee members emphasized that these expenses are required by statute and largely outside local control, meaning they must be paid regardless of district budget decisions. This affects how budget increases appear, since a portion of growth reflects external obligations rather than new spending on students in district schools.

There was also concern about how this can affect public understanding and comparisons with other districts, since total budget figures include both instructional spending and these pass-through costs.

Overall, members agreed it is important to clearly communicate to the towns that budget increases are driven in part by non-discretionary external costs, while the remaining resources are focused on direct instruction, student supports, special education, and mental health services for students attending district schools.

104437 Public Comment or Questions - None

104438 For the Good of the Order

MOTION: On Motion of Adam Emerson and second Tracey Tierney
VOTED: To adjourn the meeting at 8:27 p.m. The vote was unanimous.

Respectfully Submitted,

Aaron Dean, Superintendent

Mary Lisa Irizarry, Recording Secretary