

**ROCHESTER SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEETING
ROCHESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS
16 Pine Street
Rochester, Massachusetts
Budget Subcommittee**

February 12, 2026 at 4:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Kate Duggan, Chairperson, Robin Rounseville, Kirstin Jimenez and Josh Trombly (all in-person).

MEMBERS ABSENT: None

OTHERS PRESENT: Michael S. Nelson, Superintendent of Schools, Howard Barber, Assistant Superintendent of Finance and Operations, Shari Fedorowicz, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Heidi Letendre, Principal, and Cameron Durant, Rochester Town Administrator.

I. Meeting to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:34pm by Chairperson Duggan.

Superintendent Nelson began the meeting with a recap of the last budget subcommittee meeting and what has taken place since then. Ongoing conversations have been taking place between the administration and town officials and the state of the overall budget in the Town of Rochester. Superintendent Nelson reiterated that a level service budget was provided previously with an increase of about 11.5% but the administration was aware reductions would likely need to be made based on conversations with town officials. A revised draft budget was developed reducing 4 full time staff members in order to decrease the FY2027 Budget proposal from 11.5% to 7.3%. Superintendent Nelson stressed that these are difficult decisions that no one in the administration or the Town wants to make. He reminded those present that expenses related to Student Services and out-of-district placements have increased significantly for FY2027 and in the past the Town has relied on one-time funding to support Student Services expenses but this is not a long-term solution. Mr. Barber provided an overview by department of the proposed budget.

Mr. Durant discussed at length the broader fiscal challenges Rochester is experiencing including minimal new growth and other sources of revenue like property taxes, but increased expenses related to healthcare and pension programs for example, continue to strain the overall Rochester budget.

School Committee Feedback:

Chairperson Duggan shared the following remarks: *I know that the presentation has been upsetting, and as a parent of 2 RMS students myself, I share in your anxiety over the future of our school. But I want to make it clear that this situation is not due to fiscal mismanagement, poor forecasting, or bad decision making. Indeed, we are not the only municipality in Massachusetts facing what has been dubbed a 'fiscal cliff.' Uncertainty at the federal level has led to state lawmakers being more cautious with spending, and school funding formulas like Chapter 70 have not been keeping up with inflation or acknowledging the realities of smaller towns and schools like ours. So combined with less than generous funding from the state, the budget gap in Rochester can be attributed to unforeseeable mandated costs for special education; contractual salary increases, which happen every year but are usually manageable; and general inflationary increases on things like utilities and transportation. If any one of these drivers did not exist, we would be having a different conversation, but all of them together are putting more pressure on the budget than the town can sustain.*

Over the past 2-3 years, the RMS budget subcommittee has passed budgets where we trimmed back smaller line items to stay within a reasonable budget as determined by the town. These cuts included replacing fewer ipads and chromebooks each year and decreasing supplies allowances given to teachers. However, at this point, with a budget gap this big, continuing to trim back in this way would result in minimal financial offsets, so we are forced to look at the main part of the budget where decreasing expenses will get us closer to a final budget amount that

the town can any questions clarify questions on the budget accept, which is staff salaries in the form of reductions in force, or cutting positions.

We know this is a deeply upsetting situation, and we have so much at stake: the prospect of losing treasured members of our school staff, and the impact that will have on them and their families; the potential for larger class sizes, from 15-16 to 20-21 students per class; and the knowledge that regardless of what is decided, this budget year will have a noticeable effect on the quality of education at RMS.

So what can we do about it? As we get closer to final budget numbers, there are some ways you can take action to try to lessen the impact of this budget.

Share with us your ideas for revenue generation or expense reduction. We are very open to exploring creative solutions that will help us maintain the status quo at RMS.

Advocate at every level: for your state, your town, your school, and your kids. You are already doing this just by being here today, but there is so much more that can be done. I have been collaborating for the past few years with the Rural Schools Committee, a group of school committee members like myself and the others here who represent rural school districts. Rural schools are hit particularly hard by tough budget years like this one because our budgets are smaller overall and have less of an ability to absorb significant new costs. The Rural Schools Committee is planning for a week of collective action starting on March 9, and I will be organizing some low-lift ways to get involved. All are welcome to join and contribute, so please contact me for more information. I encourage you to also write letters or call our state lawmakers, Senator Rodrigues and Representative Sylvia, to let them know what is at stake for RMS. They have been hearing from me on this, but more voices can be even more powerful.

Finally, it is ultimately us, the townspeople, who vote and approve the final budget at Town Meeting. Make it a point to attend on May 18 and bring as many other registered Rochester voters as you can. The fiscal situation is not looking any better for next year, or the year after, and we cannot cut our way town wide to a balanced budget. In addition to attending this school committee meeting, please make an effort to attend Select Board and Finance Committee meetings as well to let them know that you want more funding streams for our school, and ask them what steps they are taking to make that happen.

Thank you again for being here tonight. I know there's really nothing any of us could say or do that would make this situation feel better. This is a time to demonstrate to our children how we respond when times get tough: we get creative, we start or double down on our advocacy efforts, and we lean on each other as a community. Thank you for sharing this space with us, and please feel welcomed to reach out to us at any time with questions.

Ms. Rounseville discussed the current situation as well and how they do not want to lose staff but understands the pressures the Town is under. Mr. Trombly and Ms. Jimenez agreed.

Public Comment:

Douglas Sims and Heidi McNeil of Rochester both provide public comments.

Superintendent Nelson closed with expressing the difficulty of the situation in the Town of Rochester.

Motion to support the administration sharing the revised budget with the four position reductions to Town Hall by Robin Rounseville

Seconded by Josh Trombly

Roll Call (Duggan; yes, Rounseville; yes, Jimenez; yes, Trombly; yes)

II. **Adjournment**

Motion to adjourn at 6:23pm by Robin Rounseville

Seconded by Kirstin Jimenez

Roll Call (Duggan; yes, Rounseville; yes, Jimenez; yes, Trombly; yes)

Motion Carries 4-0