



COLCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION
Colchester, CT

BOARD OF FINANCE AND BOARD OF EDUCATION JOINT MEETING

Tuesday, April 4, 2023
6:00 PM HYBRID
Town Hall Meeting Room 1

MINUTES

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Alexander Oliphant, Vice-Chair Mary Tomasi, Secretary Margo Gignac, Donna Antonacci, Rosemary Gignac, Michelle Millington, Christopher Rivers

ADMINISTRATION PRESENT: Superintendent Daniel P. Sullivan, III, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Charles E. Hewes, Bacon Academy Principal Amy Begué, Bacon Academy Assistant Principal Melissa Cyr, William J. Johnston Middle School Principal Christopher Bennett, William J. Johnston Middle School Assistant Principal Stacy Ewings, Jack Jackter Intermediate School Principal Elise Butson, Colchester Elementary School Principal Judy O'Meara, Director of Pupil Services and Special Education Amy Emory

OTHERS PRESENT: Business Director Rachel Linkkila, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/Board Clerk Heather Petit, Director of Digital Learning and Innovation Darren Smith, Board of Finance Members

1. **MEETING OPENING**

1.1 Call to Order

Alexander Oliphant called the Board of Education to order at 6:00 PM

1.2 Roll Call

Chair Oliphant conducted a roll call

1.3 Pledge of Allegiance

2. **CHAIRMEN COMMENTS**

2.1 Remarks by both Chair of the Board of Finance and Chair of the Board of Education

Chair Oliphant stated that it is possible to have a healthy debate in a civil and respectful manner and asked that it remains so throughout the course of the meeting.

3. **CITIZENS COMMENTS**

3.1 Public Comment

Nicole McKenzie, Bull Hill Rd.

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Gayle Furman
TOWN CLERK

Ms. McKenzie stated that the schools are struggling and behind peers in the region. Ms. McKenzie stated that given inflation and not fully funding education in the past has brought us to this point. Ms. McKenzie stated teachers go above and beyond and if the Board of Finance fully supports them, they will put the full budget forward for a vote.

Jeremy McKenzie, Bull Hill Rd.

Mr. McKenzie stated that Colchester has schools to be proud of and that the town should not be cutting our students or programming. Mr. McKenzie said if the Board of Finance continually provides less money than the inflation rate, they are essentially cutting the school budgets.

Jenny Seigny

Ms. Seigny spoke in favor of the Board of Education budget. Ms. Seigny said that minimal funding over the years is not sustainable. Ms. Seigny's hope is that the schools are fully funded for academic and social emotional needs.

Vince Rose, Shadbush Dr.

Mr. Rose said that it is always said to let the people decide; let them vote. Mr. Rose urged the Board of Finance to do just that. Mr. Rose stated if cuts reduce preschool or Kindergarten, it will raise the amount of care families will have to pay and ultimately, family taxes.

Bob Schnitman, Stone Ridge Rd.

Mr. Schnitman said that everyone hates taxes; however, the investment is the taxes. Mr. Schnitman stated they have let the community go year after year because they want the bare minimum but the Board needs to put forth the investment and due diligence and the community needs to come forward and pay for the investment. Mr. Schnitman asked why only fifteen minutes were given for public comment in a community of thousands? Mr. Schnitman said he believes it is because the Board of Finance wants to put limits on what is said and who says what.

Jason LaChapelle, Highwood Circle

Mr. LaChapelle said that over the last decade Colchester has had a 42% increase in per pupil spending. Mr. LaChapelle spoke about other districts' per pupil spending. Mr. LaChapelle stated that the Board of Finance is not just a passthrough. Mr. LaChapelle spoke to the Board of Education's decision to pay the Superintendent his current salary and that the superintendent's salary could not be lowered according to his contract.

4. BOF AND BOE CONFER ON BUDGET

4.1 Budget History

Mr. Oliphant stated that the Board of Education put accessible documents online that shows historically what the Board of Finance put forward and what was ultimately passed at referendum. Ms. Migliaccio asked why there are unexpended funds at the end of each year if the budget is not enough each year. Ms. Migliaccio said that we are not on the same page in regard to annual funding. Ms. Migliaccio said \$422,000 was not expended which went into the capital reserve. Mr. Sullivan said that many districts have a non-lapsing account where districts can put 1-2% of their remaining funds for use for educational purposes and emergency items that may come up.

Dr. Hewes stated that 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 there was a need for wireless access points for Bacon Academy that cost approximately \$40-50,000 and the district was able to utilize those funds for that. Ms. Migliaccio stated that the policy is that after the audit, the Board of Finance sends the funds to the Board of Education to use toward the Capital Plan. Ms. Migliaccio stated

there were no spikes in the past and the budget worked. Superintendent Sullivan stated that there were programs that were eliminated in the past (gifted and talented, PE staff, guidance counselors, etc.) year after year which is how the budget was able to “work.” Mr. Sullivan said he would share a report by the end of the week of programs and positions that were cut in the past due to budget.

4.2 School Spending

Christopher Rivers stated that he is the Chair of the Board of Education Budget Finance Committee wherein they review monthly expenditures. Ms. Migliaccio said she would join the Budget Finance Committee meeting tomorrow to review past monthly expenditures. Mr. Rivers said it is important to note that the Board of Education has to wait until the full month’s spending is expended before they can report on it.

4.3 Special Education

Amy Emory stated that Mr. Sullivan sent the excess cost information to the Board of Finance in regard to special education. Ms. Migliaccio asked how much is not reimbursable as the Board of Finance is not aware of any expenses in the past that were not reimbursable. Ms. Emory stated that she has to ensure student confidentiality at all times. Ms. Emory stated that in regard to their specific question, due to a student’s high level of need, the programs in the State of Connecticut could not meet those needs. Ms. Emory said that the district is still responsible to meet those needs so they looked outside Connecticut for services to assist the student. She stated that the placement of the student is over \$600,000 due to the outplacement out of state and as it was out of state, it was not approved for reimbursement by the State of Connecticut. Ms. Emory explained that she did reach out to the State Department of Special Education in regard to this placement and asked if there was an appeal process and was told that the district is not eligible to appeal. Mr. Rivers stated that he and the Superintendent met with the Representative Jeff Currey, Chair of the Education Committee, and the Board will not know what the legislature can do for the district given the extreme special education staffing shortages across the state. Mr. Sullivan stated that the school district is doing everything it can to minimize the impact.

Ms. Migliaccio asked about gifted and talented programming and special education students. Clarification was made that the transition program (CTAC) is for students 18-22. Art Shilosky asked about the transition program. Dr. Hewes stated that the district is required to provide education to special education students through 22 years of age. Dr. Hewes said that before the district had the transition program, many of those students were outplaced and at a significant cost to the district for programming and transportation. Dr. Hewes said the current transition program is important to have as it helps keep our students home, in the community where they live, and to provide them education where they live.

Mr. Vaillancourt asked if the district was aware that the town would not be compensated when the student was outplaced and how long does the district have to provide the program for the student. Dr. Hewes and Ms. Emory reiterated that they could not give out that information as it is highly identifiable to the student. Mr. Vaillancourt then asked if this was part of a settlement agreement and did a guideline change? Ms. Emory stated that per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) an annual review is required to create and review a student’s

plan and is reviewed annually by the district to see if their needs change. Ms. Emory stated that the district follows the law in regard to a student's program and it is the district's obligation for every student. Mr. Sullivan said that they need to be careful in regard to the ongoing conversation. Mr. Sullivan stated that while he respects the questions and rationale behind the questions with this expense, it is important to understand that this is a child in our district and the family lives in the community. He would not want the family to be subjected to ill will due to this line of questioning.

4.4 Unexpended Funds Policy

Ms. Migliaccio stated that she would like to see where the unexpended dollars were spent over the last few years. Mr. Rivers said that the money generally sits in the unexpended funds and to use the money in that account, the Board of Education has to go through the Board of Finance to use those funds. Mr. Shilosky stated that in the past, the district once asked for a new van and also had to fix an air condenser/compressor in the high school. Ms. Migliaccio stated she asked the Board of Selectmen to move toward an operational audit. Mr. Shilosky said having a 10-15% fund balance is critical due to bonding. Michelle Millington asked if \$2 million in the balance is from the Board of Education and could possibly be used to offset items in the budget. Ms. Migliaccio stated that the purpose of unexpended funds was for a capital plan. Ms. Millington stated that when the Board of Finance said well there is \$2.4 million dollars they could use then that is not true. Ms. Migliaccio stated she did not say that.

Michael Egan stated that unexpended funds and the policy gives the Board of Finance responsibility to put those funds toward different items. The Capital Reserve Fund is associated with the schools and the town has that as well. Mr. Egan stated that it is important that the town have money there so if something comes up it can go toward needed services.

Ms. Migliaccio stated that there is a minimum amount they are allowed to reduce the Board of Education's budget by. Mr. Rivers asked about ECS funding, excess cost and tuition, preschool fees, and pay-to-play. Mr. Rivers said it is his understanding that preschool and sports is already built into the Board's budget and the others go to the town. He asked what happens when more money comes into the town than is anticipated. Dr. Hewes posted that the excess cost is a reimbursement from the state and if the state reimburses more than was budgeted, the remaining money goes to the town. Dr. Hewes explained how the excess cost reimbursement works and stated that the money is intended to go back to the Board of Education to offset the costs but that has not been happening. Ms. Migliaccio said they can further dive into that during the operational audit.

4.5 Minimum Budget Standards

No discussion was had at this time.

4.6 Drivers of Education Increase in Colchester

Drivers of education increase were emailed to the Board of Finance by Superintendent Sullivan, as well as part of the budget presentation found on the Board's website.

4.7 Programming

Ms. Migliaccio asked what programming was lost last year in regard to the budget. Dr. Hewes said that it is difficult to speak to specific programmatic cuts (i.e. getting rid of French). The previous superintendents did not want to cut all of one program or whole content area, and rather spread it out so that it did not have such a deep impact on all students. Ms. Migliaccio said now that he is in charge of curriculum, why is curriculum in the budget for \$65,000. Dr. Hewes clarified that he has always been in charge of curriculum. Dr. Hewes said that based on programmatic needs, you may see a one-time large purchase (i.e. Wonders reading program). Michael Egan said that every single Board of Education budget presents section 3, budget development and then goes to the Board of Education and then the Board of Finance makes the final number that is sent to referendum. Margo Gignac said if the Board of Finance goes back and listens to Principal Christopher Bennett's presentation, they will learn more and more programs that have been lost. Ms. Gignac stated that the district lost alternative education and Ms. Millington stated that the district also lost Math Olympiads. Ms. Gignac stated that if you listen to the principals' presentations, you will see everything that the schools have lost. Ms. Gignac stated there has been no balance for that over the years. Ms. Gignac said that the previous superintendent, Jeffrey Burt, told the Board of Finance that moving salaries into grants would cause a cliff as they would have to be put back into the budget as the grant ended. Dr. Hewes said they have also lost individual fine arts teachers and as such, the last time children are required to take music or art is grade 6 due to previous reductions in staffing. Superintendent Sullivan said the district lost a family consumer science program at WJ, an AP teacher and class at BA, guidance counselors, PE teachers, the gifted and talented program to name a few.

4.8. Other

Capital Plan

Superintendent Sullivan stated that there is a capital plan in last year's budget for 2022-2023. Mr. Sullivan said that there is not an update to the Capital Plan as it occurred before he arrived. Ms. Migliaccio said that is fine but would like one for the next three years. Ms. Migliaccio said the numbers in the Board's budget do not match the capital plan.

Ms. Linkkila said that the capital outlay is for minor items that need to be done during the summer. Ms. Linkkila stated that she believes that those items are getting confused. Ms. Linkkila explained her line items per grounds and capital outlay. Mr. Egan said that operational needs are becoming pressing because the Board of Finance keeps cutting it. Mr. Egan said the Bacon Academy roof is 30 years old and there are other significant operational needs.

Mr. Egan said that this meeting has been all about interrogating the Board of Education. Mr. Egan stated that he is looking for solutions as it is a very challenging year. He said that the Board of Finance has to look at services as well as the ability to pay for them. Mr. Egan would like to be able to ask specific questions in regard to certain line items and would like the opportunity to talk about some of these issues. Ms. Migliaccio said that Mr. Sullivan answered her questions via email.

Discussion was had on the health reserve account. Mr. Egan reported that the town and Board of Education self-insure and there is a company that helps oversee those funds (Lockton). Ms.

Linkkila said there are multiple fees that go into employee insurance and budgeting including fixed expenses for administrative services, fixed expenses (aggregated and stop loss insurance claims), Lockton fees, PPI benefits solutions (employee self-enrollment portal), COBRA, teachers retirement contributions, payments for insurance waivers, Life ADD insurance, and long-term disability insurance. Ms. Linkkila said she worked with Lockton to get the numbers but it is a large moving number based on employee health issues, pregnancies, etc. Ms. Linkkila said that although the Board pays the same for insurance as the town, the town receives much better benefits than the Board of Education does.

5. BUDGET DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion on the 2023-2024 Budget

Ms. Migliaccio said that they are going to ask the Board of Education to identify savings at a future date.

6. CITIZENS QUESTIONS

6.1 An Opportunity for Citizens to Ask Questions to the Board of Finance and Board of Education

Suzie Milner, Buckley Hill Rd.

Ms. Milner spoke to an article in Norwich Bulletin in 2013 in regard to full day kindergarten. Ms. Milner said that the boards worked together to find a solution to be able to offer the full day program. Ms. Milner asked if the boards could find a way to work together again.

Deanna Bouchard, Meadow Dr.

Ms. Bouchard stated that per FOI the Board of Education needs to answer the question about whether or not there is a settlement agreement for the out of state placement of the special education student. Ms. Bouchard also asked why the Superintendent's salary was so high.

Mr. Sullivan said that confidential student information is not subject to FOI. To answer the second question, Mr. Sullivan spoke to his current contract and stated that it is comparable to other superintendents in DRG-D. Ms. Gignac gave data on area superintendent salaries that are comparable or higher than Mr. Sullivan's.

Mr. (name unclear)

Asked if the Board can make a simple list for the public of all the cut programs and staff. Mr. Sullivan said he will work on that information and have it online by the end of the week and post it to the Education Budget webpage.

Jeremy McKenzie, Bull Hill Rd.

Mr. McKenzie asked for explanation on what a current services budget means and if it is not fully funded, what that entails. Ms. Linkkila said that the original budget started with over a 14% increase. Superintendent Sullivan stated that they were able to reduce the budget more by reducing an office professional position, third grade teacher, family consumer science teacher, Director of Human Resources reduced to a human resources coordinator and a reduction in summer hours for guidance counselors.

Ashley LaParre, McDonald Rd.

Ms. LaParre asked where the money from tuition revenue specifically goes. Dr. Hewes said there are two sources of revenue that are built into the Board of Education budget; pay-to-play and preschool tuition. Dr. Hewes stated that other tuition (Norwich tuition, special education, CTAC, etc.) revenue goes into the town's general fund. Ms. LaParre asked how much of this revenue is in the general fund. Mr. Egan said that it has not been audited yet but after the audit the town will have a final number. She asked if maybe those funds could be used to offset this year's Board of Education budget. Mr. Shilosky said that they have been advised from the people who do the town's bonding not to do that.

Ms. LaParre stated that maybe the town could choose to spend a percent of their ARPA funds for the Board of Education. Ms. LaParre also said it would be helpful to have a quick sheet of definitions for unexpended, capital funds, etc. She stated she hopes that the Board of Finance tries to find a place to use funds to offset the budget.

DeAva Lambert, Middletown Rd.

Ms. Lambert asked why there is a 50% increase in supplies. Ms. Lambert stated that she didn't believe the Superintendent and Director of Special Education did their due diligence in regard to special education services provided for the out of state student.

Mr. Sullivan stated that as Ms. Emory spoke to earlier, the district did apply to have the cost reimbursed. Mr. Sullivan said it was not accepted as it was not on an approved list and as there were no in-state placements to service the student's needs, the district was not able to receive reimbursement. Mr. Sullivan spoke to supplies needed by teachers, state mandates and inflated costs of items.

Tiffany Moroch, Oakley Dr.

Ms. Moroch spoke about looking for creative solutions to help fund the schools.

Mario Nozzolini, Westerly Terrace

Mr. Nozzolini asked if the district cannot disclose whether or not the special education student's placement is part of a settlement, can the district disclose the name of the school? Mr. Sullivan stated no, that would give very identifiable information.

Bernie Dennler

Mr. Dennler stated that when the Board of Finance talks about cuts to education, they are often in essence talking about teachers as salaries are 80% of the budget. Mr. Dennler asked if the Board of Education could forecast the cost of special education going forward. Mr. Sullivan stated that the district does have a projection of costs and could give a total overall dollar amount.

Mr. Rivers stated that he is looking forward to having conversations with the Board of Finance in regard to items that will be decreasing in the budget (i.e. Honeywell) as the payments end.

Sara Mussen

Ms. Mussen asked if the Board of Education's budget format is okay now for the Board of Finance. Ms. Migliaccio said yes and no. Ms. Migliaccio said there was no reason to change the format; however, she sent an email asking all her questions and Mr. Sullivan sent all of the answers. Ms. Mussen asked the Board of Education if they were to receive anything less than the 9.83%, would they have to find cuts. Mr. Sullivan said yes, cuts will have to be made.

Ms. Mussen asked Mr. Vaillancourt why he said that no matter how he received the information he would absolutely not approve the budget as is. Mr. Vaillancourt said that increase is not responsible or sustainable for the entirety of the population. Ms. Mussen said that there was discussion at the last Board of Education meeting that moving kindergarten to half-day would need increased services down the road. Mr. Vaillancourt said it is not the Board of Finance's job to make decisions in regard to programming, it is the Board of Education's job.

Ashley Zaugg, Usher Swamp Rd.

Ms. Zaugg asked Mr. Vaillancourt what the number would be that he thought the town could afford. Mr. Vaillancourt said he has not reviewed all of the information sent by the Board of Education and could not give a specific amount. Ms. Zaugg asked what the timeline is for the Board of Finance for actual action in regard to the budget. Ms. Zaugg stated parents need to know if their child will have half-day kindergarten, no preschool slots, or a job. Ms. Migliaccio said that it would be determined.

Deanna Bouchard, Meadow Dr.

Ms. Bouchard thanked Mr. Vaillancourt for his statement in regard to the budget. Ms. Bouchard said there is a memorandum about what the Board of Finance's job is. Ms. Bouchard asked about preschool tuition. Ms. Margo Gignac said that in the past there was no charge for preschool but now there is a cost for preschool which is another program that was lost. Mr. Sullivan said there is a sliding scale for school readiness slots in the preschool program. Judy O'Meara stated that tuition is currently \$1,500 a year for a full school day and \$750 for a half-day program.

Tiffany Moroch, Oakley Dr.

Ms. Moroch asked about the timeframe of the budget process. Ms. Migliaccio said they will discuss this at the end of the meeting. Ms. Moroch asked the Board of Education if they have thought about any other options to reduce the budget. Mr. Sullivan said that they have talked to other districts about making Bacon Academy a designated high school and would work to make that an option for other communities. Mr. Sullivan stated that if Bacon Academy's programming was not in place it would make districts choosing Bacon as designated school that much harder. Mr. Sullivan might also look into a magnet school program as well. Ms. Moroch asked if universal preschool is a goal of the district. Ms. O'Meara said that tuition rates are set by the Board of Education and there is data that shows the benefits of preschool for all children.

Karen Belding, Deer Run Drive

Ms. Belding said she got her questions answered at the Board of Education Community Forum last week and thanked the Board of Education for hosting that event. Ms. Belding said she is

concerned that the Board of Finance says it is just their responsibility to come up with a number because it is irresponsible not to ask what that impact is.

Michael Dubreuil, Woodbine Rd.

Mr. Dubreuil asked why the district has to pay for special education and why does it have to pay for a student with a high cost of outplacement? Mr. Sullivan stated that it is a law and the district has to comply with the law.

Ms. (name unclear)

Ms. asked if any Board of Finance members went to the Board of Education meeting last week which was three hours long and where a lot of questions were answered. Mr. Egan said that he went to the meeting. Ms. Migliaccio said that she sometimes works at night and has a child so cannot go to all meetings. Ms. Migliaccio said that the Board of Education's budget was not presented in Munis format like they were accustomed to. She said it took all weekend to make a long list of questions. Ms. said it is frustrating that the Board of Finance has all the information they need and still canceled the meeting.

7. PUBLIC COMMENT

7.1 Citizens Comments (3 minutes, no 2nd comment, 1 hour max)

DeAva Lambert, Middletown Rd.

Ms. Lambert said that citizens need to know why the cost is so high for the outplaced special education student since the outplacement was not approved by the state.

Deborah Coats, Balaban Rd.

Ms. Coates asked the Board of Finance if there is a target percentage that they were thinking about that they could share with the Board of Education.

Deanna Bouchard, Meadow Dr.

Ms. Bouchard stated that the Board of Finance is not targeting one student. Ms. Bouchard said that the last time she spoke to Dr. Hewes, he said they had not looked into the special education student cost. Ms. Bouchard spoke to the integrity of Ms. Migliaccio.

Jim Shuman, Prospect Hill Rd.

Mr. Shuman said that working people would not come to the town and ultimately pay taxes if there were cuts to education. Mr. Shuman said he is happy to pay taxes for the senior center and education as it is the right thing to do for the community.

Courtney Kaur, Colburn Dr.

Ms. Kaur said she appreciated that at the beginning of the meeting there was an effort to look at the budget holistically so we can have a sustainable school budget moving forward. Ms. Kaur said that it would be fiscally irresponsible to not realize there are cuts on the line if the Board of Finance made reductions.

8. NEXT STEPS

8.1 The Board of Finance and the Board of Education Will Discuss Next Steps
Ms. Migliaccio said the next meeting of the Board of Finance is on April 10, 2023 in regard to the Town budget. Ms. Migliaccio said that April 12, 2023, is the Regular Board of Finance Meeting and at which they will be discussing the education budget. Mr. Egan said the Board of Finance should come up with percentages and hear from the Board of Education on what the potential impacts might be.

9. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 9:59 PM

Respectfully submitted,

Heather R. Petit
Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/Board Clerk