

**ACTON PUBLIC and ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL
SCHOOL COMMITTEES
Minutes (approved 3/1/12)**

School Department FY'13 Budget Presentation

Library

R.J. Grey Junior High School

January 28, 2012

9:00 a.m. – 1:45 p.m. Joint SC Budget Presentations

1:45 – 3:00 Acton Public SC Budget Presentations

Members Present: Brigid Bieber, Dennis Bruce, Mike Coppolino, Xuan Kong, Kim McOsker, Paul Murphy, Maria Neyland, John Petersen, Bruce Sabot

Members Absent: none

Others: Don Aicardi, Marie Altieri, Deborah Bookis, Liza Huber, Steve Mills, Beth Petr, Principals, APS and AB staff members, members of the Acton and Boxborough Finance Committees, Acton and Boxborough Boards of Selectmen and the public

Chair John Petersen called the Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee to order and Chair Mike Coppolino called the Acton Public School Committee to order at 9:04 a.m.

1. Superintendent's Introduction

Dr. Mills welcomed everyone and introduced the budget presentations. The almost 200 slides are posted at <http://ab.mec.edu/about/meetings.shtml>

2. FY'13 Budget Overview

Finance Director, Don Aicardi, began by stating that the Administration is optimistic about revenue for next year, but cautiously so. It will be a more austere time requiring a true team effort to get through. Regarding Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB), this issue has been building for some time and is a liability across the Commonwealth. Serious discussion in the near future will include setting up a trust account at both the Town and the Region for this purpose.

Bruce Sabot noted that as a regional school district, the overall student population of our schools is declining and the revenue percentage from Boxborough is also declining. He expressed concern that people might blame Boxborough that the dollar shift is happening due to Boxborough's declining enrollment, but overall the pot of money is still the same. John Petersen recognized Bruce's comment as an important one, stating, "We all need to keep in mind that we are here to serve Acton and Boxborough."

3. Pupil Services

Director of Pupil Services, Liza Huber, began with a cartoon illustrating the highly unpredictable nature of special education services. Referring to slide 11, she stated that the day's focus is the top area of the cost triangle. She spoke about always striving for a continuum of services. The Connections Program continues to grow and was proposed at the High School for next year. This could mean that some students may be brought back into the High School and may prevent some from going out of district. The circuit breaker reimbursement funding was budgeted at 42% and received at 65% for the current year, creating important resources. Liza emphasized that program development within the district is key to controlling costs. She also emphasized that districts are required to meet the legal mandate.

Early identification and intervention pays off for students who need special education services, making our preschool program essential to our overall plan. When asked about the Connections program's relationship

with other special education programs, Liza explained that Connections does not deliver services, but it is a support for those students who need it. A member stated that while it is a good concept, he was trying to understand the cost benefit. Liza said that Connections is a support program, to help students access regular education. Without this type of support program, some of the special education needs for specific students would be higher because they would require other individual services. When asked if any of the \$187,000 could be eligible for circuit breaker reimbursement, Liza said she would have to cost out each student's program to see, but that it was not likely. When asked if any of the services could be sold to CASE or other groups to generate additional revenue, Liza said that this would only be if we have space available after accepting our own students. For many of our specialized programs the Districts do offer them to other communities who pay us. Liza emphasized that providing intensive services early means a greater possibility of not needing that level of intensity, or in some cases the service at all, as the children grow.

Liza was asked what makes her comfortable with the 65% reimbursement number included in the proposed budget. She said it is based on history and having good communication with people at the state level as well as our own Administrators including Finance Director, Don Aicardi and Our of District Coordinator, Matt Kidder. When asked what will happen if funding ends up less than 65% next year, Liza said that she will work with it and is always looking at how adjustments can be made given the changing nature of special education services.

Nancy Sherburne, Sped PAC Co-chair, spoke from the audience. She asked how many students are currently at the High School who might benefit from a Connections program. Liza said there are 20 – 25 students right now at ABRHS. Programming for these students is now being done on an individual basis, often meaning contracting with highly skilled professionals. Starting our own program, could reduce some of these services needed for those students to succeed. Liza also pointed out that there is legislation proposed requiring a licensed transitional specialist to be in place. If this passes, our staff will have to be trained at significant expense.

Allen Nitschelm spoke from the audience asking about the slide showing FTEs. Liza explained that the more expensive professional staff are at the top and the less expensive, non-professional staff are at the bottom of the chart. Steve Mills stated that many of these slides are from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website. He thanked Liza and her staff for being so cost efficient.

4. Human Resources

Marie Altieri, Director of Human Resources, began by noting the many recent changes to health insurance costs this year, including some just a few days ago. The Acton Board of Selectmen will consider a proposal on Monday night. ALG will also discuss this on Monday. Information is in the School Committee packet. A one page handout with details of the new plan design proposal was distributed. John Petersen noted the progress made in getting all of the school and town unions to accept the proposed health care plan design changes. It is a huge accomplishment, led by Marie.

Marie spoke about student enrollment, emphasizing that Acton and Acton-Boxborough are still on page one of the state student-teacher ratio listings – with one of the highest ratios, a real weakness in our districts. It was noted how frustrating this statistic has always been for our School Committees. Declining enrollment will help a little. Chapter 70 state funding will not be increasing this year for the first time.

The demographics of our staff over the next few years were discussed. Marie said typically we have had 14 or 15 retirees for several years, K-12. She predicted 7 for the next 2 years and we currently have only 4 retirees that we are aware of at this time.

The Enrollment Projection slide was shocking to some, but not unique to Acton. The Region dropped 34 students this year. APS dropped 60 students in FY'11 and 60 more students in FY'12. Kindergarten

registration for the general public will be in mid March. Enrollment is projected at 280 for Kindergarten in September.

5. Technology

Amy Bisiewicz, Director of Educational Technology, began with a video of students talking about their enthusiasm for the Smart Boards. Brigid Bieber was happy to see how much of Amy's efforts are tied in to the Long Range Strategic Planning goals.

Xuan Kong stated that the Blanchard School in Boxborough has many more computers per student than Acton schools have because they have a strong source for donations. He asked if the districts could start a campaign to look for donations, so new equipment does not have to be purchased regularly. Amy will contact Anne Kingan and see if the School to Business Partnership can help.

Dennis Bruce asked about the \$65,819 per year for 4 years proposed to refresh the APS Mac computers with operating software. Amy confirmed this saying that with the new machines i-books can be used and the Mac app store is very good. Teachers can download things like the i-book author and publish students' books, and more. It was noted that this platform also provides us an avenue to address textbooks that could affect our long range plan. John stated that technology is not "if" it will happen, but "when". When asked when she expects e-books to be a significant option for textbooks, Amy said that it depends on building principals, teachers, parents and policies, acknowledging that there is lots of work to be done in this area. Preparations include getting the schools' wireless access ready to meet these demands.

Mike Coppolino cautioned the Committee not to succumb to "the lease is up and here are some new boxes". He feels if another year or two could be squeezed from the current machines, there is a real advantage to waiting before purchasing new ones.

Clint Seward spoke from the audience, advocating for the schools to stay up to speed with the technology that kids are now using and loving. His grandchildren all have computing devices and really know how to use them. Amy invited everyone to take a look at the digital textbooks on her iPad during the break.

6. Curriculum

Deborah Bookis, Director of Curriculum and Assessment, began by thanking the Committee on behalf of the elementary schools for the textbooks purchased for FY'11. She then highlighted the Professional Learning work done this year, including an "extraordinary event" with Dr. Barry Fishman from the University of Michigan last summer that really pushed the staff's learning and was well received.

The amount of money spent on professional development in our two districts in the past has put us in the bottom of the state lists. A conscious effort has been made this year to start to address this issue. Mike Coppolino said that given finite funds, if he had a dollar to spend, he would put it into professional development for the staff. He said that studies indicate that the best place to get "bang for the buck" is in professional development.

One member noted that the NEASC Report comments are recommendations, not requirements. Xuan asked about the time component for members participating in professional development. He asked who pays for the substitutes when staff is out. Deborah said that 7% of her budget is for professional learning. The Committee talked about early release days. The late starts/early dismissals reduce the amount of substitutes needed. These new schedule changes at the Junior High and High School have been well received by the staff.

7. Acton-Boxborough Regional High School

Principal Alixe Callen presented the proposed budget for the High School given the context of the District's Long Range Strategic Plan, NEASC Recommendations, Technology Needs, and her building based goal to Enhance Social Capital. She outlined the current High School Initiatives, at no cost: learning

goals, seminar groups, advisory, English electives, Arts requirement, Google Apps, Global learning, Saturday night activities, Green flag, and Anti-bullying.

Her prioritized personnel requests for FY13 included: 1. 1.0 Counselor, 2. 2.0 English Teachers, and 3. 1.0 Special Education Assistant (completion of the Hayward Center). Dr. Callen also shared the unfunded (not proposed) personnel/program/capital needs that she and her staff feel are important to keep in mind.

8. R.J. Grey Junior High School

Principal Craig Hardimon presented the proposed budget for the Junior High. Current RJGJHS initiatives include: Learning Goals, Second Step (Bullying and Teasing prevention curriculum), Literacy across the curriculum, MOBI, Textbook Rollout (7th grade Spanish and 8th grade math), and Protocols (Critical Friends and Lesson Study). His proposed budget priority was adding a .2 FTE Drama teacher to bring the current teacher to full time. His unfunded personnel needs were to add an Academic Support Center Teacher and Assistant Teacher, followed by replacing a 12 year old PC lab with a 30 station mobile cart. This priority was followed by an unfunded request for an after-school Homework Club stipend and a Physical Education Assistant Teacher. Unfunded capital needs included: science tables and stools, 8 thirty station netbook labs and a digital project system.

Questions were addressed to Alixe and Craig together. Differences between the Academic Support Centers at the Jr High and High School were discussed. A member asked if the district had looked into offering Academic Support Center hours before and after school hours so more students (at RJ Grey) could participate. Craig said one issue is transportation, and also that kids are very busy after school. Alixe said that with the 8 period day at the High School, students generally take 5 classes. She wants to be sure that students don't feel like they can't participate fully in school life because they need academic support. The High School's NEASC Report recommended that adding counselors be higher priority than adding staff to the Academic Support Center, but it is also mentioned. Of the 4 english teachers who left the High School last year, none said the class load was the primary reason, but they all did mention it. Alixe stated that the single thing that she has seen change the most over the past 18 years is a decline in the social and emotional health of students.

John Petersen said that the need that the schools have for a technology vision that marries home, school and education is upon us and the impacts on the budget are large. Alixe said the districts have a tremendous advantage now with their relationship with google and ABSchools.org. Giving every student a school email address and access to google docs has significantly improved student communication and connection with the teachers and staff.

John also noted that the "LRSP" at the bottom of many of the slides is about strategy. John thanked the Long Range Strategic Planning Committee for the ability to discuss a budget that is tied to a well thought out plan like this.

A break for lunch was taken at 12:30.

9. Facilities

Director of Facilities, J.D. Head thanked everyone for supporting his efforts in Facilities and Transportation. He recommends suspending the roof replacement plan for another year. He has been very involved in the proposed Lower Fields Project. He noted the increasing programmatic demands outside of the school day on existing infrastructure including: Acton Chinese Language School, Danny's Place, Sports, and High School Saturday Night events. He also has a request to expand the existing physical infrastructure (AC). He expects to save \$25,000 minimum for FY12 by switching solid waste vendors.

Electricity consumption continues to decline as highlighted dramatically in Slide 12 comparing December 2010 break use and December 2011 break use. Natural gas use also has declined. While there are many social benefits to cutting energy consumption, J.D. has a business view and when the limit is reached,

business wise, he will make it clear. He is proud that students understand what is happening and are impacting and leading this change.

Several Committee members asked about the \$68,000 grant that funded the Energy Advisor position this year. While it was stated that the current person is making a great impact, this position was funded because the APS district originally received a grant from the state, then from NSTAR. Moving this expense for FY13 to the appropriated budget is a “philosophical issue” for Xuan. He feels that when a position is funded by a grant, and later moves to the appropriated budget, it becomes much tougher to not fund. J.D. stated that this is a value judgement and reminded the Committee of the money that the Facilities department has saved and returned to be used to purchase textbooks, technology, and more to further the education of our students. Mike Coppolino asked J.D. why this advisor should be full time, and what the ongoing benefits of the position would be. JD replied that he and his current staff have more than they can do right now. Steve Mills stated that there is clear history that this position saves money.

10. Finance

Director of Finance, Don Aicardi discussed recent staff changes due to the “ferocity of hours” required to get the work done. A new Administrative Assistant was added during FY12 and is now in the FY13 budget. This is budgeted .25 FTE for Finance and .75 FTE for Central Office support. An existing Finance Admin Assistant was converted to a Finance Specialist position. These changes have been very successful. A new, additional Finance Budget Analyst position is requested in the proposed FY13 budget. This proposal is to realign staff to fully comply with State requirements and reflect today’s workload, expectations of higher scrutiny, and conformity to required sound business practices. Don’s plan is also to improve the quantity and quality of higher level analysis for the Finance Director, the Superintendent, other School Administrators, the School Committees and the public. Don also pointed out that we are not in 100% compliance with MA State Law Chapter 71, Section 16B with regard to the separation of some of our regional school district financial transactions. The proposed solution is to shift some treasury responsibilities from the Business Coordinator to the Finance Specialist, who is now under the direction of our part time Treasurer.

11. Community Education

Erin Bettez, Director of Community Education presented although Community Education does not receive funding from the appropriated budget. Erin complimented Sally Cunningham’s ability to bring a new perspective to the programs. Enrollment is down but revenue is up this year. Erin described the difficult decision to eliminate less popular programs. After 4 years, the catalogue has been tightened up and expense reporting has been improved. When asked for an approximate number for Community Education revenues, Erin said it was about \$400,000.

ABRSD BUDGET DISCUSSION

Steve Mills said that while there are many educational needs that should be filled, only the essentials are being proposed.

John Petersen said that while direct instruction is important, the backroom/Central Office must be kept in good order. He strongly supports a more robust level of support and analytical analysis. Xuan Kong asked for clearer justification for all new FTE requests. Mike Coppolino said this was one of the most interesting School Committee presentations he has seen. He recognized John Petersen’s advocacy a few months ago to address the Health care issues and now all will benefit from it. He also thanked Xuan for his leadership on the Long Range Strategic Plan.

Jonathan Chinitz spoke from the audience. After thanking the staff and School Committees for the presentations, he urged them to remind the public about the unfunded needs so they are not forgotten.

Brigid Bieber stated that while the Connections program is not being proposed for funding at the High School, it could be justified. She also said that the 2 additional English teachers at the High School as well

as the drug/alcohol counselors and additional counselors are all justified but not being asked for. She recognized that this is the reality of our budget, but emphasized that these are all very real needs affecting our kids today.

The Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee adjourned at 1:55 p.m.

The Acton Public School Committee Meeting continued at 2:00 p.m.

ACTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS BUDGET PRESENTATION

Steve Mills introduced the panel: Liza Huber - Director of Pupil Services, Deborah Bookis - Director of Curriculum and Assessment, Damian Sugrue - Conant Principal, Christopher Whitbeck – Douglas Principal, Lynne Newman – Gates Principal, David Krane – McCarthy-Towne Principal, Edward Kaufman – Merriam Principal, Mark Hickey – Performing Arts Director, Diana Woodruff – Visual Arts Director, and Mary O’Brien – Physical Education Teacher.

The FY13 proposed APS Investment Budget includes:

Staff:

- \$108,000 In Classroom Assistants (\$21,600 per school)
- .4 FTE ELE teacher (\$26k)
- FTE SPED Teacher New Resource Room at Douglas (\$56k)
- .8 FTE Music Specialist (\$45k)
- FTE Physical Ed (\$58k)
- .6 FTE Art Specialist (\$43k)

Other:

- .5 FTE Budget Analyst (\$30k)

plus Health Insurance For Six Potential New Positions EST (\$89k) for a **TOTAL of \$487,000**

Liza Huber stated that the recent Coordinated Program Review recommended an increase in staffing for our ELE program. Chris Whitbeck spoke about the need for an additional special education teacher at Douglas. Currently, he is creating one-to-one programs for some students whose needs are not met in the mainstream classroom. Although the students are having a good experience, it is not cost efficient. It is hoped that adding this new special education teacher/coordinator at Douglas will also prevent students from being moved from school to school for services.

Steve Mills said that it was astounding to him when he came to our district that APS has never had a full time teacher for art, music and physical education. Fundamentally, he considers this being understaffed. Deborah Bookis introduced Mark, Diana and Mary who shared the difficulties of not having full time staff in their disciplines. A new arts graduation requirement will be proposed to the Regional School Committee in March. These requests are supported by the new Long Range Strategic Plan.

APS Budget Discussion

The Committee appreciated the need for art, music and physical education resources, but as enrollment declines and sections are reduced, a member asked what the plan will be as our student population goes down. Steve Mills responded that the current requests are to complete something that should have been done a long ago.

The Committee had many questions about the Douglas special education teacher addition and whether it was to establish a new program or a resource to address current student need. Liza said that it is part of a

broader program involving emotional and behavioral issues and that ideally a new program would be established.

John Petersen asked, in terms of school choice, what guidance is given to parents on how a specific school can serve a child's special education needs. Liza replied that because specialized programs exist in four of the five elementary schools, when a child is found eligible and needs are identified, a discussion of what programs and in what school they are in takes place. This comes up in the team meeting process and early in the transition process. When asked how significant a problem it is that some children are identified before they start school, while others are identified when they are in school, Liza explained that all schools have a continuum of learning centers and programs. Because more specialized needs are more complex, sometimes the priority becomes the service delivery and needs over the culture of the school. A problem used to be that a program and school were recommended and after a family becomes involved, the child has to switch schools because their program ended and he/she has to go to another school to continue the services. The Committee asked for more specific information on this proposed position at Douglas at their next APS meeting.

Nancy Sherburne, AB SpedPAC co-chair, spoke about the difficulty of these particular students to switch schools and transition in the middle of their elementary school experience.

Liza stated that the additional .4 ELE teacher will provide direct service to Gates students where the need is identified.

When asked, Steve Mills stated that this budget adds \$108,000 for assistants to the \$108,000 that was added this year. He would like to get to the equivalent of one assistant per grade level to relieve some of the pressure on the PTO fundraising. He noted that the Merriam School has a different philosophy that requires assistants. This money is designed not to increase the number of assistants, but to decrease the PTO funding of assistants already there. Several committee members emphasized the importance of the ratio of trained adults to students in buildings.

Mary Ann Ashton spoke from the audience. She asked if the specialist proposal would add more direct instruction time for students. Deborah Bookis said it would not add to music, art and PE class time, but it would benefit the broader school community, and improve the quality of service and student assessment. This addition would give more opportunity for quality art and music in the classroom, not solely in art or music classes.

The Acton Public School Committee adjourned at 3:18 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of documents used:
Agenda attached
Handout from Marie Altieri regarding Health Insurance

**ACTON PUBLIC and ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL
SCHOOL COMMITTEES
Meeting Agenda**

**Library
R.J. Grey Junior High School**

**January 28, 2012
9:00 a.m. – 1:45 p.m. Joint SC Budget Presentations
1:45 – 3:00 Acton Public SC Budget Presentations**

School Department FY'13 Budget Presentation

9:00	Superintendent's Introduction	Steve Mills
9:15	FY'13 Budget Overview	Don Aicardi
9:30	Pupil Services	Liza Huber *
10:15	Human Resources	Marie Altieri **
10:35 BREAK		
10:45	Technology / Curriculum	Amy Bisiewicz / Deborah Bookis *
11:30	Junior and Senior High	Alix Callen / Craig Hardimon *
12:15 LUNCH		
12:45	Facilities	JD Head **
1:00	Finance	Don Aicardi **
1:15	Community Education	Erin Bettez **
1:30	AB Budget Discussion	

AB Regional School Committee adjourns / APS SC Meeting continues

1:45	Acton Public Schools (K-6)	Steve Mills - introduction Liza Huber Deborah Bookis Damian Sugrue – Conant Principal Christopher Whitbeck – Douglas Principal Lynne Newman – Gates Principal David Krane – McCarthy-Towne Principal Edward Kaufman – Merriam Principal Mark Hickey – Performing Arts Director Diana Woodruff – Visual Arts Director Mary O'Brien – Physical Education Teacher
2:30	APS Budget Discussion	
3:00	Adjourn	

* includes 15 minutes of Q and A

** includes 5 minutes of Q and A