

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee (ABRSC)
FY18 Budget Saturday Meeting
Approved Minutes

Library
R.J. Grey Junior High School

Saturday, January 21, 2017
8:30 a.m.

Members Present: Diane Baum, Brigid Bieber (left at 10:50 a.m.), Mary Brolin, Amy Krishnamurthy, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, Kathleen Neville, Maria Neyland, Deanne O’Sullivan (9:20 a.m.), Kristina Rychlik, Eileen Zhang

Members Absent: none

Others: Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Glenn Brand, Clare Jeannotte, Beth Petr

The ABRSC was called to order at 8:30 a.m. by Chairperson Mary Brolin.

8:40 Panel 1: Budget Overview

A. Superintendent’s Overview: Budget and Long-Range Strategic Plan (LRSP) - *Glenn Brand*

- i. LRSP Goal #1: Understand and respond to our students’ social-emotional needs
- ii. LRSP Goal #2: Our students will have equitable opportunities and tools to learn
- iii. LRSP Goal #3: Our students will have access to a safe and effective learning environment (capital needs and improvements)

B. Financial Highlights FY18 Budget - *Clare Jeannotte, Director of Finance*

C. Staffing, Enrollment, and Elementary Class Sections - *Marie Altieri, Deputy Superintendent*

Committee Questions

Questions were asked about McKinney Vento Act and some of the issues that come up for our homeless students. A member asked about the cost to process Medicaid reimbursement and whether we think it will increase. Dawn Bentley said that this is proving fruitful although the biggest cost is staff time to handle it. We also pay a fee to the system we are using to help with the Medicaid outreach.

OPEB funding was discussed. Clare Jeannotte stated that this is the plateau year, but funding is up to the School Committee. The next valuation will be in a few months. The Health Insurance Trust is looking at plan design and other details. Regarding the Workers Comp and fringe benefits issues, members view this year’s hit as a one-time thing like the Minuteman Tech change or the capital spending piece. Clare pointed out that there are choices to the capital items, but not true for Workers Compensation. Regional transportation was also discussed.

The Committee discussed student enrollment and how to handle unexpected increases. The same number of classrooms is budgeted for next year as this. We have to be flexible. We could shift one of the classrooms we have kept in to a different grade if the numbers require it.

Community Questions:

An Acton Finance Committee member asked about the Moody's outlook in 2015, and how that relatively negative rating would be now. Clare stated that was because we were tapping reserves and it was decided that it was not sustainable. It is up to the School Committee to decide how they want to move forward. Mary Brolin added that part of the reason was full regionalization. The E and D funds were suddenly much less a percent of the overall budget. We are now replenishing it and it will be strong next time. Clare reported that Moody's was in the District regarding refinancing and when that was done, Standard and Poor's gave us a triple rating. Some people feel Moody's and S&P approach things very differently.

A question about declining enrollment was addressed by Marie. She stated that over the past 6 years, we have tried very carefully to reduce classrooms as enrollment has changed. Margaret Busse asked about the funding for the 3 school youth officers. It was noted that the schools have a very collaborative relationship with both towns' police. Support comes from both towns. There was a time when there was a shared cost between the town of Acton and the District for an officer, because they work for the Acton Police, but that has changed now. ALG was involved in this process.

When comparing FTE counts, it was noted that some districts include different positions than others. AB currently has 70 AB custodians/bus drivers – that group might not be represented in other communities because their town might employ them, or they are outsourced.

The question was asked, "What is your goal for E&D?"

Clare stated that as Finance Director, her goal is to continue to grow E&D to the 5% maximum level, but it is a School Committee policy decision. The more we can stabilize our reserves the better. A cushion is not built in to the budget.

Acton Finance Committee member Bob Evans referred to the Fincom's Point of View document commenting that the local seniors are concerned about a 2% increase. He asked the Committee to look at the budget and reduce the impact on the seniors. He stated that, "only a portion of the town benefits from the schools and seniors need your consideration."

Break

10:20 Panel 2: Our Current District Priorities

Dawn Bentley, Pamela Smith, JoAnn Campbell, Damian Sugrue, Dana Labb

1. High School Social Workers (1.4 Full Time Equivalent - FTE)
2. Expansion to Pathways Autism Program (1.0 Teacher, 0.2 Speech Language Pathologist)
3. School Psychologist (0.2 Preschool, 0.4 Elementary)
4. Elementary Education Team Leader (ETL 1.0)
5. English Language Education Teacher (1.0 at Conant)

Committee Questions

Demographics are changing and students' needs are changing. The expansion of Pathways is to meet the needs of our current students. There is some potential to bring some students back into district, but this program can only accommodate 12 students at this time. It was asked if the District is "doing enough" regarding the needs of our ELL students. It was asked how the students who are not getting

enough ELL services impacting the students and staff in the classrooms. Dawn Bentley said that some teachers don't always feel prepared to help these students with language learning issues. Dawn is offering a coaching model. It was agreed that there are some wonderful benefits of having many cultures in the classrooms. JoAnn Campbell described how the staff is working with these students at the High School. The staff tends to work with the whole family helping the student become more culturally comfortable. For a student to enter at the High School level with language difficulty, it is very impactful to their learning.

The Committee discussed the cons of having 75% of the students in one school be of one ethnicity. Our district is great because of its diversity, but it can't be all in one school, was one comment. Administrators are trying to find ways to make it more balanced in the schools. Kindergarten parents were told that they may be limited to certain schools if they need ELL services.

The Committee agreed that there is still a stigmatism to ask for mental health help, despite all the efforts being made. JoAnn explained that at the High School, there are multiple entry points where staff finds kids at risk – teachers bring students forward, counselors get involved, other kids want to know more about mental health and depression AND how to help someone else. The administration and counselors went into the classrooms and have been talking about this. They really try to get to know the kids well. She does not expect the staff to be social workers, but to be able to identify kids who need help. Dawn Bentley said that the Administration is making plans to offer screenings to students soon. More information will be coming.

Lunch Break

12:00 Panel 3: Additional Position Requests

Andrew Shen, Mark Hickey, JD Head, Steven Martin

1. Conversion of Junior High Department Leaders to Assistant Principal
2. Strings Teacher Expansion (0.2)
3. Groundsperson (1.0)
4. Athletics Addition

Committee Questions

The Committee thanked the Administration for the new strings program. Mark Hickey explained how it is being expanded, as planned. The Committee appreciated the conversion at the Jr High and that it is cost neutral.

12:40 Panel 4: Capital Planning

JD Head, Glenn Brand

- A. Capital Planning: short-term, medium-term, long-term
- B. Update on Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) process and timeline for potential building project

Committee Questions

The Committee asked many questions about the upcoming building project plans. One member is concerned about "scope creep" once plans are made and the District starts digging. JD Head explained the work that has taken place to date to get as good a handle on the sites as possible, at this stage.

It was questioned whether the maintenance shed site would stay in the current space and if feasibility funding should be spent on it. JD replied that they need to know what is “happening on the site” no matter what is planned for it. Dr. Brand noted that this is more than a maintenance or storage shed. Work is often done on the District’s 33 buses in that area. There were health and safety issues identified however so it will be closely studied. Maria Neyland stated that the Committee should approve the \$26,000 for the study and then she’d like to see the testing on it before deciding whether to move forward with a building on the site or look for a new location.

12:30 Panel 5: Looking Ahead: Teaching and Learning As We Expand our Notion of Success

Deborah Bookis, Dawn Bentley at 1:10

- a. Structures - Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)
- b. Roles - Coaching
- c. Learning Spaces - Capital Plan

Committee Questions

Diane Baum stated that in the 17 years that she has had children in the schools, she has seen a real move from a quantitative to a qualitative approach to special education. She feels this will be very impactful and she thanked the administration. Deanne O’Sullivan noted that this is a framework that addresses learning and achievement for all students, not just those receiving special education services. Dawn was asked how they would get teachers to “own” this. She stated that they will go slowly starting with the principals. The intent is that teachers would step in to the coaching role eventually. Coaching is a non evaluative role because it has to be a safe space for teachers to discuss things. Eileen Zhang likes this approach because the District does not have Gifted Programs and this is important for those students as well.

Superintendent’s Closing Remarks

School Committee Discussion, Feedback and ABRSC Preliminary FY18 Budget VOTE

(Per the ABRSD Regional Agreement, *“The preliminary budget shall be approved by a majority of the members of the Committee from each member town. “* This budget shall be prepared by 1/28/17.)

Panel 2:

A better understanding of special education funding is needed, not one on a per pupil basis because it is not representative and not good for the community, in one member’s opinion. The possibilities of the Pathways program were discussed, including if students from outside the district could be tuitioned in, although Dawn wanted to think about this further. Maria Neyland pointed out that prior to full regionalization, changes to the Pathways program would have been explained at Boxborough Town Meeting. Now that the Blanchard School is part of the AB Region, and Town Meeting does not go into the details of this unique classroom setting, Boxborough citizens are not as familiar with the program as they might have been. A member asked if the Pathways program is expanded and some students from outside of Acton and Boxborough are accepted into it, would it mean they can continue on through R.J. Grey Jr High and our High School? Dawn stated that this would be an annual decision at their IEP Team meeting.

Mary Brolin concluded that she heard support from the Committee for the Panel 2 items as proposed.

Panel 3:

The Committee supported these requests. Kristina Rychlik emphasized that athletic team parents and boosters have felt overburdened with funding requests for years, as the Committee has heard. There is inequity among teams and she appreciates the assistant coaches proposal.

Panel 4:

Although she is in support, Maria Neyland is concerned about the estimate looking high. It was confirmed that the District is also looking for outsets on boilers and some support around Leary Field. She wants a better understanding of all of this before the final budget. JD has talked about a Green Communities grant potentially for this project but it won't hit the cycle properly. There are others he is looking at. Regarding Leary Field, he can't speak for the community groups, but their goal is to raise a significant amount of money to help out. They plan to commit to it by April. Maria appreciated knowing this.

Concern was expressed by one member about going out to the community for assistance, like for the Lower Field that has resulted in an outside group now scheduling the fields. Mary Brolin stated that the budget subcommittee sees some of the challenges that have occurred and would watch that in the future. Gratitude was expressed for the ongoing support of our many community members.

The Committee discussed the importance of timing of some of the capital items, particularly the high safety items and that the District cannot take the time they might like or need, to make a funding source work. It was pointed out that the Committee is also trying to make the capital line item "real each year now". They discussed the bucket strategy and that it was at ALG's request to split capital needs out as they did and show the .6 so it was visible.

MOTION:

Paul Murphy moved, and Maria Neyland seconded:

***Motion:* that the total appropriation for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District for the fiscal year of July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2018 be set at \$86,600,058, and that member towns be assessed in accordance with the Education Reform Law and the terms of the Regional Agreement and amendments thereto as follows: Acton \$58,331,535, Boxborough \$11,714,872, remainder to be accounted for by the Anticipated Chapter 70 Aid in the amount of \$14,833,821, Anticipated Charter School Aid in the amount of \$25,004, Anticipated Regional Bonus Aid in the amount of \$49,000, Anticipated Federal Medicaid Reimbursement of \$100,000, Anticipated Chapter 71, Section 16C Transportation Aid, in the amount of \$1,345,826, and a transfer from E&D Reserves in the amount of \$200,000.**

Discussion of the Motion:

Amy Krishnamurthy expressed concern that this budget is "way off from the Fincom Point of View and that it is too high for Acton and we will have to lower it." Maria Neyland was supportive but reminded the Committee that it could be voted lower at a future meeting. She did not see where cuts to this budget could be made or anything nonessential. Amy agreed but felt it needed to be said. She urged the Administration to take a look at any other funding sources that may be available. Deanne O'Sullivan agreed that it is high, but she thought they agreed that they need to add substantial capital and that is what is making it higher. She thought that was discussed at ALG.

Kristina Rychlik appreciated Amy's point, but she is glad they are making minor additions to essential needs although she thinks it's not enough. Kristina is fully supportive of this budget. Mechanisms are in place in our two towns to work with our boards about this.

Marie Altieri stated that the Acton Finance Committee talked about a 3.3% operating budget increase and they also wanted the schools to increase capital. ALG is meeting next week and it can be discussed. The District is proposing a 3.42% increase and a bump in capital (that doesn't come near what is needed, a member pointed out), and it includes the Minuteman Tech increase. Marie stressed that if there is going to be feedback that changes need to be made, it needs to be done quickly. Health Insurance Trust will vote a preliminary amount this Friday and that might help.

Maria Neyland stated that it was mentioned in the fall that someone at ALG said that the ABRSD did not fund capital properly, so the feedback should be that Capital has been a focus for this budget and this is what needs to be done.

The Acton Boxborough Regional School Committee unanimously VOTED in support of the motion.

The ABRSC adjourned at 2:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Petr

List of Documents Used: FY18 Budget Binder, Presentation slides

The ABRSC FY18 Annual Budget Hearing will be held Thursday, 2/16/17 at 7:00 p.m. in the R.J. Grey Junior High Library. A final budget will be voted by the Committee by 2/17/17.

Materials are at <http://www.abschools.org/school-committee/meetings-agendas-packets-and-minutes>
This meeting is expected to be broadcast live at <http://actontv.org/>