

**Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee (ABRSC)**  
**FY21 Budget Saturday Meeting**  
**Approved Minutes**

**Administration Building Auditorium**  
**15 Charter Road, Acton, MA**

**Saturday, January 25, 2020**  
**8:40 a.m.**

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Members Present: Diane Baum, Michael Bo, Adam Klein, Ginny Kremer, Amy Krishnamurthy, Tessa McKinley, Maya Minkin, Paul Murphy, John Petersen, Nora Shine, Angie Tso  
Members Absent: none  
Others: Marie Altieri, Dawn Bentley, Deborah Bookis, Debbie Dixson, JD Head, Peter Light, Beth Petr, Dave Verdolino, members of the Acton and Boxborough Finance Committees, and the public (approximately 20 people in the audience)

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The ABRSC was called to order by Chairperson Tessa McKinley at 8:40 a.m. She thanked all for attending and wished everyone a Happy Lunar New Year.

**Budget Overview**

**1. Budgetary Vision and Alignment with District Goals - *Peter Light, Superintendent***

Peter reviewed the new handout from Budget Sub that closes the gap in the Town of Acton Budget, as discussed by the Budget Subcommittee yesterday.

**2. Finance Overview – *Dave Verdolino, Director of Finance***

**3. Staffing Overview – *Marie Altieri, Deputy Superintendent***

Benchmarking data from the DESE RADAR website of our comparable communities was reviewed.

**Questions /Discussion**

- Slide 22 reflects the additional E&D use but the numbers at the bottom are not updated.
- The district has a policy for E&D use, but not policies for all of our reserves. A member felt that this affected some of the discussions at ALG meetings because the Town of Acton does have these policies. It would be helpful for the District to have similar ones.
- It would be helpful to see the number of sections and staffing needed as enrollment changes.
- By using an aggregate effort to create the budget, keep in mind that there's a risk that something will be missed when making decisions. Consider what is discretionary for the School Committee compared to what is happening beyond their control, such as in the health care area.
- Enrollment shifts, as always, were of interest to members. Andrew Shen's extensive memo at the November 5<sup>th</sup> School Committee meeting provides lots of detail. Last year some Jr High teams had 128 students, far beyond the 95 goal. This year is much better with team sizes of 105.
- Beth Baker explained why the reallocation of the High School Data Manager to the Dean of Academics (\$15,000 increase) was important. We only have 1 digital literacy specialist for the entire district. The additional .4 Health and PE Teacher at the High School provides more supervision for students.

- With the additional \$150,000 of E&D use, we are at our lower threshold of 4% as established by the budget subcommittee.
- Concern was expressed about what looks like “one time” cuts to things, like office furniture, that will then be added to the operating budget the next year. Peter emphasized that if supplies money was allocated for staffing, it would be a permanent reallocation.
- Our number of students with disabilities has gone down, although we are increasing at a rate higher than the state.
- Acknowledging that the only state-wide measure of “success” is MCAS, members encouraged the Administration to expand that to include external measures such as engagement.
- The Student:Teacher ratio is directed related to class size. Because we have the number of paraprofessionals that we do, our ratio is very low. We need to keep in mind what the students’ needs are and what we are trying to address by using the assistant instead of a certified teacher. The District uses paraprofessionals significantly more than our comparable communities. Peter noted that the new Math Teacher, Digital Literacy Specialist, STEAM Coach and increased Health/PE Teacher would improve this ratio. Decreasing enrollment also helps this ratio. A member asked for the Student:Teacher ratios for the past 5 years.

**Audience Questions:**

- Are the same number and quality of people applying for our ABRSD jobs? This depends on the areas. There are many elementary teachers who apply, but consistently fewer special educators.
- An Acton Finance Committee member asked why there was such a push for All Day Kindergarten (ADK) given the large expense and the current financial situation of Acton. The response was that it was an equity issue and more than 90% of families would choose ADK if cost were not an issue. Some of our most vulnerable students are enrolled in half day kindergarten. Financial aid for ADK was discussed and the increasing need for it. The member countered that the District is taking a program that pays for itself and adding significant cost to the budget and taxpayers. School Committee members noted that they were very careful with their vote on this subject. Despite the slides’ detail, the timeline was not set for it beyond FY21 because they want to know a secure funding source. Members were described as “extremely sensitive to our students’ needs and educational issues”. A member read the voted School Committee motion to remind the public.
- In response to a question about health care costs, Dave Verdolino reported that the District spends annually \$8M for non-retirees and \$1M for retirees. The retiree number is growing. We do not have an opt out benefit for current staff, unlike the Town of Acton, because analysis has shown that it would not help us.

**Special Education Realignment of Services**

Deborah Dixson, Interim Special Education Director presented. She noted that she was surprised by the number of special education assistants in the District. She would like to shift the balance a bit to provide more qualified licensed teachers to address our most vulnerable students. Peter added that all staffing changes combined

represent reductions of .4 FTE but they are trying to be very strategic about how resources are allocated with concern for our taxpayers.

### **Questions / Discussion**

- Members appreciated how clearly the information was organized.
- Three times as many students are in Learning Centers as are in kindergarten. Understanding all of the special education costs is critical, especially with the future of ADK. There must be equity for both groups. Early intervention is key.
- A member was very concerned about having consistent programs across all of our elementary schools. It was explained that this is not possible as some of the programs are for students with “low incidence” disabilities, meaning they are not very common. Students in this group attend the school that offers the particular type of program that they need. Although designed as district-wide programs, it would be financially not feasible to offer all of these programs in all of our schools.
- A member asked to see data from the students for the previous 5 years so progress could be measured. Past data like these measures, does not exist because Debbie just created these charts.
- These staffing changes affect Social/Emotional Learning because counselors are being added to the SEL program across the board. Part of their role is to support the General Education environment because that is where most of these kids are. They will also model techniques for the General Education teachers.
- David Krane explained that the district is working on co-teaching and moving that model into the classroom in a purposeful way. Different ways of service delivery will be seen next year.
- A member stated that this plan is right in line with providing an equitable education for all students and including them in the general education classroom, which is so important.
- Members would like to see some of the new building project plans for these areas as it will be a budget driver in the future. The goal is to have a language learning program in the new building.
- Student numbers for the Junior High are high for next year and it is tough because they’re coming from programs that are not clearly defined and now they will fit into programs that already exist at the junior high.
- At the High School, they are talking about a floating system to allow some special education rooms to be open all the time. Space is really tight now with the rotating schedule.
- Members shared concern that some vulnerable students will have a hard time moving from their home school to a new school for a specialized program. This is not what staff wants or plans to do, but it may happen. The key for a student with a disability is thorough skill based instruction.
- It would be good to see a voice for the kids that are not identified yet, especially those in K,1,2,3.
- A member commented that things that impact the schools don’t end with the school day. He encouraged the Administration to look at parental supports next year. Parents are a key part of a student’s experience and should be included. Look at this more holistically. Debbie agreed that parents are critical.
- The district is working on a multi-tiered system of support for kids depending on need.

### **Audience Questions**

- In response to a question, Debbie said that the placement of kindergarten students is somewhat arbitrary (unless their needs have already been identified) because they are just entering the school system, and it is “a moving target”.
- Amanda Bailey, SEPAC chair, appreciated that the Administration is looking at educational models for all students, not just those on IEPs.
- CASE transportation is a big expense and growing. We could potentially bring some of it in district but could never do it all ourselves. All districts are concerned with special education transportation. We are considering looking into other providers at the School Committee’s request.
- The Student:Teacher ratio is all certified staff. We are currently at 14.7 and 5 years ago we were 14.6. Ten years ago we were at 18, which was the second highest in the state. We are still 22<sup>nd</sup> highest.

### **Capital Summary**

1. Bond Status – *Dave Verdolino, Director of Finance*
2. Capital Funding Plan – *JD Head, Director of School Operations, Peter Light, Superintendent*

### **Questions**

- Working with the Capital Improvement Subcommittee and creating the new Capital website to keep track of projects, expenses and changes has been a major change. The District now has a much more aggressive and responsive approach than in the past with good supervision.
- Establishing the stabilization fund was very helpful regarding the bond issue.
- In any program involving a series of projects, the accuracy of the plan is higher in the first years. For FY20 and 21 it was very clear what we would do. Beyond that there is some flexibility and decisions to make

### **School Committee Discussion and Preliminary FY21 Budget VOTE**

- There was general consensus that lowering the Student: Teacher ration should be a focus.
- The presented budget does not include the first year bond payment on the school debt. Dave explained the schedule and that those amounts will need to be in the final appropriation. It is important that everyone be aware and understand this.

### **John Petersen moved and Adam Klein seconded the motion:**

“That the total appropriation for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District regular operating budget for the fiscal year of July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021 be preliminarily set at \$93,974,777, and that budget will be funded by member towns to be preliminarily assessed in accordance with the Education Reform Law and the terms of the Regional Agreement and amendments thereto as follows:

Acton \$63,106,272 (consisting of a Capital Assessment of \$2,714,221 and an Operating Assessment of \$60,392,051); and

Boxborough \$11,662,969 (consisting of a Capital Assessment of \$393,897 and an Operating Assessment of \$11,269,072);

Offset by use of E&D Reserve in the amount of \$1,145,000;  
With the remainder accounted for by sources of revenues to be detailed in the final budget vote.

And furthermore, that the final budget vote will be adjusted to include an appropriation for the estimated first year debt service on the bond to be issued for the construction of the new Douglas-Gates Elementary School.”

## **Discussion**

In response to a question about the savings on the interest that would be generated, Dave Verdolino said that the Debt Strategy subcommittee was created in part to estimate the impact of decisions on the tax payers. They will be meeting with the District’s Financial Advisor next week to strategize about the details of this. This will be an integral part of the next vote by the Committee at their meeting on February 6, 2020. It was noted that that District Treasurer has the legal authority to make these type of bonding decisions for the District.

The ABRSC **VOTED** and UNANIMOUSLY approved the motion as presented.

The ABRSC was adjourned at 1:11 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Beth Petr

### List of Documents Used:

FY21 ABRSD Budget Binder, Presentation Slides, Handout: Town of Acton Multi-Year Financial Model from ALG including changes, Table 6 dated 1/24/2020, and vote language for FY21 Budget & Assessments and Bonded Debt Authorization