

Filed subject to approval

REGION 9 BOARD OF EDUCATION
REGULAR BUDGET WORKSHOP MEETING

Thursday, March 11, 2021 – 7:30 p.m.

Virtual via Zoom:

<https://zoom.us/j/99874177976?pwd=dFFHb2FVZStUjBWczFHTEdtWUVXZz09>

Meeting ID: 998 7417 7976

Passcode: 299951

Minutes

ATTENDANCE

Board Members: T. Johnston, C. Graziano, M. D'Agostino, M. Pampel, G. Denny, M. Williams, K O'Brien

Absent: J. Berry

Administration: G. Pin, Dr. Harrison, Dr. Pierson Ugol, C. Zachary, M. DiStefano, D. DeAngelo, P. Panos, A. Staron

CALL TO ORDER

The Region 9 Board of Education regular budget workshop meeting was called to order at 7:33 p.m. by Chairperson T. Johnston

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes from the March 4, 2021 Region 9 Regular Meeting with Budget Workshop were reviewed. C. Graziano noted that the following corrections were made to page 2, paragraph 12 to read as follows:

Lengthy discussion of changes to school SRO ensued. Some Board members expressed concern that this was the first they learned of the Administration's plan to change and that coverage and safety would not be comparable with the SSO changes. Other board members asked about the cost savings, differences between SSO and SRO and suggested the SRO may have capacity to assume other responsibilities.

Motion: move to approve the minutes from the March 4, Region 9 Board of Education Regular Meeting, as amended (Pampel, Graziano). Approved, 7-0.

PUBLIC COMMENT: None

BOARD MEMBER COMMENT:

M. D'Agostino commented on the Spring Musical discussion. He was copied on emails from a couple of parents and spoke with Dr. Harrison who enthusiastically supports the Spring Musical in a socially distanced location.

He wanted to follow up in requesting that Spring Musical discussion be added to the regular board meeting next Tuesday and have the Administration come to the meeting with a plan, to include a defined timeline and logistics to be shared with all.

T. Johnston added that all spring activities, sports, awards, etc. should be added to the next regular Region 9 Board of Education agenda.

M. D'Agostino questioned if there was any plan to reinstate activity period this year and if so, can the Administration articulate what the plan is or if we're working towards this goal.

C. Graziano reiterated what M. D'Agostino said with regards to the art and music students to have an equal opportunity to pursue those activities that they enjoy.

G. Denny seconded M. D'Agostino and C. Graziano comments and also stated how she appreciates the notices of Covid-19 exposures, etc. that have been coming out. Ms. Denny suggested possibly adding a comment that teen parties should not be condoned. Now that the weather is getting nicer, she realizes how hard this compliance may be.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: PROPOSED 2021-2022 OPERATING BUDGET

Dr. Harrison thanked all for the comments particularly those about the changing models and shares Gwen's frustration about teen party large social gatherings. He asked families again to please be diligent and that while we are really close, it is important for everyone to do their part. He does not want to spike the ball at the five yard line. Current travel restrictions are in place and they will most likely be shifting to recommendations at the state level. The Administration is working on language before sending any notifications out. As for the budget, the Administration will follow up on the conversation of building on the Special Education Bridges program and the Social Worker position. Also, the Administration will discuss a few loose ends on some other budget items. A questions document is checked regularly and Dr. Harrison believes all questions have been answered at this point.

Dr. Pierson Ugol reviewed the 2021-2022 Region 9 Budget Detail for C.O. Curriculum Funding Forecast and noted that the curriculum and professional learning items were located in the 1116 tab. She noted that this work is always tied to a district level initiative, required by all three districts or by a state mandate and can also be related to joint committee work or vertical alignment. This work supports a smoother transition between middle school and high school. Dr. Pierson Ugol sent a document to the Board and advised that she is available to review the document she sent to T. Johnston and would be available to answer any questions the Board may have.

T. Johnston screen shared the presentation and Dr. Pierson Ugol went through it, explaining the Department Goal, Action Plan and Cost of each. Dr. Pierson advised that the K-8 districts relied on the Atlas program, which was used by the middle schools in the past.

While it was the intention last year to move towards a Google folder platform that work did not happen due to the pandemic. Any questions about the curriculum work will be organized through her office.

M. D'Agostino asked if Dr. Pierson Ugol could detail how much curriculum work was done last summer as there was money in the budget for the items being requested this year, which appear to be duplicates, and he wasn't sure if this was due to the pandemic. In addition, he questioned if the money last year was repurposed to use for pandemic related curriculum or was it just put in un-spent funds. He stated that he feels the public would like to know this and if the money was spent on something pandemic related, we should receive reimbursement for that. He wanted the public to understand how this was disbursed.

Dr. Pierson Ugol advised that all the money allocated last year was used for curriculum last summer with some of it going to different departments to modify. For example, Music class has very specific guidelines as to how the students must be distanced, etc. so minor funds were used towards this. Dr. Pierson Ugol stated that we did not apply for reimbursement since, at that time, the money was not available for that purpose. The money has been rolled out by the state throughout the course of the year. For example, we were purchasing PPE using operating budget money and the state did not appropriate funds until much later in the year.

M. D'Agostino asked Dr. Pierson Ugol to reassure the Board and the public that the Administration did everything possible to maximize reimbursement for pandemic related expenses that we may have occurred that was handled through the operating budget. Dr. Pierson Ugol advised that the money received from the State at the beginning of the year was all tied to the purchase of hardware and technology. Since reopening, state funding has been used to purchase PPE but we have since found out that we will be receiving additional money. The money allocated for curriculum writing was still used for curriculum writing to enable teachers to engage their students this fall even though the plan had changed.

Dr. Pierson Ugol moved on to Professional Services. This work is mostly used for consulting work, the STEM Consultant and Teachstone, which is the company we've used for the past several years for administrative training. This money was used for travel, training and the assessments required at the end of the training. This training has been remote this year but next year, it may revert back to in person training so this had to be accounted for in the budget.

The next item discussed was the \$5,000 that has been earmarked for the Connecticut Center for School Change work. Their scope of services, based on where we are right now in March, will not be completed this year so money allocated could continue into next year. Money has been set aside in the next year's budget to continue this work. Professional Development sessions, consultants and assistance in course review with our teachers, etc. Dr. Pierson Ugol stated that while this would not be more the \$5,000, it can certainly be less than that.

C. Graziano questioned if this could be working Professional Development with all JBHS staff only or could it be working with Department Chairs to adjust the curriculum. Dr. Pierson Ugol confirmed that it could be both.

T. Johnston asked if this was a change to their statement of work or if this would be a new statement of work. Dr. Pierson Ugol stated that we don't have a statement of work so to speak, but based on where we are now, they will complete their work into the fall. Beyond that, we would need a new statement of work. If we want to be thorough, we should earmark money in the budget next year.

A discussion took place on how the Connecticut Center for School Change was selected through a vigorous process and the needs will change based on our needs.

Dr. Harrison advised that when they first met with the consultants to talk about the scope of work, one of the things he stressed was that both he and Dr. Pierson Ugol were very adamant about the importance of their focus being around building capacity within the district. He does not want to become dependent on a consultant from now into the future. Their focus has been on building capacity within the district.

Dr. Pin presented the 2021-2022 Region 9 Budget Detail for Joel Barlow High School Curriculum Funding Request also in tab 1116 of the proposed budget. Since it is a new format this year, Dr. Pin went through each specific line item explaining the Goal, the Action Plan and the Cost of each. She explained that the Humanities curriculum, line 1114, is a course that is a very prescribed curriculum outline coming from the state and she wanted to be thoughtful in looking through the units to ensure they run parallel with the students not impacted by the change. The state would be providing further instruction on this and the change is scheduled to take place in the 2022-2023 school year. While it is required that we offer this course, it is not required that students take it. The Administration will provide a resource list, etc. when completed. Currently, there is work being done on Humanities for 2021-2022 course work that will continue throughout the summer. There is a new course in Humanities, which was approved by the Board which is World Language – Mythology and Etymology which responds to the state mandated World Language graduation requirement.

Language Arts, tab 1115 – Ongoing review of summer reading and writing with regards to books and rubrics based on student data performance.

Science/Math/Technology, tab 1119 – the Administration is looking at student performance data for alignment and focusing primarily on Geometry. Dr. Pin stated that while we traditionally received funding from the Perkins Grant, we did not receive it this year due to course offerings and not being able to add business into that grant requirement. T. Johnston questioned the amount of the Perkins Grant.

J.T. Schemm advised that the Perkins Grant is a consortium grant pooled with six smaller schools and is approximately \$15,000 but is for any projects across Engineering, Business, and EMT courses. Dr. Pin stated that the Administration would like to review the Business and Accounting programs for this coming year. The Engineering curriculum and standards would also be vertically aligned between courses and levels.

PE/Health, tab 1121 – Dr. Pin stated that in this area, the Administration would like to establish standards and rubrics for advocacy project and review assessment data for curriculum review. Mastery based evidence of a credit. Students can obtain this credit through the advocacy project.

Special Education, tab 1200 – Funds set aside to look at existing structure and services based on student needs. Funds also set aside for the Special Education Bridges program.

School Counseling, tab 2120 – Helping students embrace learning by planning seminars and workshops to meet the needs of students.

Psychological Services, tab 2140 – These services are to support the mental wellbeing of students and assist families in need through planned classroom lessons, workshops and seminars.

C. Graziano questioned how Professional Development is shaped when planning the upcoming school calendars are being developed or does it develop and take shape over time; in a normal year, how would it typically evolve?

Dr. Pin stated that this is part of the work they do over the summer. They look at what the focus would be. Based on the work they are doing now, they will see a lot of Executive functioning skills. Then they would look at the curriculum and how do we prioritize it as they attempt to bring back the joy of learning to the students.

Dr. Pin showed a slide reflecting the Budget Proposal on Feb. 16, March 4 and where we are currently on March 11, 2021 at .79% or \$24,544,046, with a variance of \$192,791. T. Johnston asked if the increase is with the SSO or the SRO and Dr. Pin confirmed that the .79% includes the SRO and the Social Worker.

M. D'Agostino had a question relative to Health Insurance. He stated that since Brown & Brown had indicated that there would be a significant decrease, the budget numbers appear to remain flat. He then asked if the calculation was based on a flat health insurance which is then based on year over year or had the reduction been included in the total.

C. Zachery commented that he believes this was taken out from the original budget at some point and confirmed that the \$400,000 was carried over.

M. DiStefano, Director Special Services and D. DeAngelo, Department Chair, went through a presentation on the need for an additional social worker. M. DiStefano reviewed what is currently offered to the students. D. DeAngelo talked through the least restrictive placement in the continuum of services slide. He stated that the anticipated student population for next year is approximately 139 with 120 being in district and 19 out of district. Projecting the number of students in the Bridge program in 2021-2022 will be 12. M. DiStefano stated that they have seen an increase in social and emotional needs in the students due to COVID. It was noted that while the total number of students has declined from 875 in 2018-2019 to 825 in 2020-2021, the number of students with IEPs has increased from 13.7% to 14.4%. The overall percentage of students with IEPs compared to students who do not is on the rise.

M. DiStefano talked about how when the Bridges Program was initiated in 2019-2020, they were estimating they would have about five students. Since then, the number has increased to 15 or more. We now have thinned out the support and stretched people to their limits. While there is currently one Behavioral Technician along with a Certified Teacher, the addition of a Social Worker/Psych Services is greatly needed next year as more students will be back in the classroom. M. DiStefano said that he feels this is the best way to keep students in district.

Dr. Pin commented that when this Bridges Program was first brought to her by D. DeAngelo and P. Rosko, they attempted to do this in the most fiscally responsible way, with the least amount of staff. They have been using the mental health services of the Social Worker and the Psychologist in the same way they were using the Certified Teacher before an FTE was there. These are people who have other responsibilities to the entire school and because of this, they are not available full time. We don't have a .5 position – these are people doing double and triple duty now.

M. DiStefano proceeded to explain Investment vs. Cost Avoidance in comparison to the Social Worker and if out of district placements were necessary. He also mentioned that we have to provide out of district placement to those students who have graduated from Barlow but still require the service until age 22. A slide comparison of out of district tuition was also presented.

D. DeAngelo shared a slide of the services students are accessing and what the Special Services team has accomplished with the Bridges Program. He stated that while the financial impact may be great, the impact they are making on children and families is much greater.

P. Panos also spoke of the need to restore the school Psychologist and Social Worker Services to all students, alleviating the need to pull from full time counseling staff who are currently doing triple duties. She feels this is in the best interest of the students and the district and implores the Board to see the value in this. Dr. Pin stated several months ago, the Board asked them to come up with a list of pandemic needs and the consultant for cognitive behavioral work with students is one of those needs. The Administration had a lengthy conversation about adding a social worker.

The Administration had decided against it for the fact that they didn't believe it was a one year position and invited the Board to ask as many questions of the team as possible.

T. Johnston opened the floor to the board for any questions.

M. D'Agostino thanked the team for the presentation and said it was very helpful. He said he believes that the Board articulated in the beginning of the school year and if there were any COVID related needs to the student body, to please bring them forward to the board. He doesn't believe the board was requesting that anything you need, you should come to them because they have unspent funds. It is our mission to be sure all our students are provided for by the district. Secondly, he does see the rationale and the need for the position but wondered if M. DiStefano or D. DeAngelo could articulate on the numbers as he believes this may lead to a much different conversation. M. D'Agostino said it is helpful to better understand if we're talking about 12 students and going to 15 or if we really are talking about going to 22 students.

Both D. DeAngelo and M. DiStefano advised that there are significant struggles and the intensity of needs as well as the amount of students has increased. The additional struggles for next year is there will be no Cohort C and you may be discussing shortened days, walking students from the buses to the schools, etc.

G. Denny wanted to clarify that prior to the Bridge Program there was only one Social Worker and two Psychologists that were existing positions all along. Positions were created but not staffed. Existing resources were being tapped, creating more of a need for staffing because of the need to have more students in the building.

K. O'Brien asked for a brief synopsis of what a typical day would look like for a Social Worker or Psychologist.

M. DiStefano commented that they would be involved in individual counseling, group counseling, consulting services to parents and families, consulting with outside providers, school counselors, teachers and other staff members to be sure they are achieving academically and overcoming barriers.

M. Pampel questioned what is done if a student is very good academically, tests very well but has anxiety, therefore has school avoidance. She stated that she is being very specific because she is not sure people understand the needs of some of the students that could benefit from a program like this.

D. D'Angelo thanked M. Pampel for the question because they do have students with such needs and they offer them a small, quiet room where they can make the adjustment from home to school. They call it "bridge services" because it acts like a bridge between home and school. Once the student is comfortable, they have teachers coming to them or they are zooming into their classes. Reintegration plans are then developed to get them slowly back into the classroom.

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M. DiStefano stated that the students see it as a program that is part of Barlow and gives a sense of belonging to them.

M. Pampel reconfirmed that by doing this, we keep a student inside Barlow as opposed to going outside to seek another program that is not as good as Barlow.

T. Johnston asked for confirmation that the current 0.5 FTE proposal being presented is one social worker and two psychologists, all in, part time, or coming from the general education population to provide for the Bridges Program.

Dr. Pin confirmed it would be one FTE person and they chose to go to the social worker certification for the reasons outlined earlier. Their training would allow for that home connection working with families and they believe they could find the right qualified person.

M. DiStefano confirmed they would not need a Psychologist as they have two FTE Psychologists now who do a tremendous job.

T. Johnston also questioned if the \$85,340 for the social worker was a fully loaded cost or if it was just compensation.

Dr. Pin confirmed that was only salary. C. Zachery advised the benefits were rolled into Benefits objects located in lines 270, 271 and that since we're self-insured, it's baked in. T. Johnston asked for confirmation that the salary is then \$85,000 plus benefits and C. Zachery confirmed this.

C. Graziano thanked P. Panos for her very convincing statements and commented that since our Psychologist and Social Worker are being stretched, would this imply that there has been a gap for the children in 504's, IEPs, or homebound? Was there less attention paid to these children?

P. Panos said that she wanted to make it clear to everybody that no students are neglected. What is neglected is the paperwork, the attention to attend a meeting, the inability to run a department meeting because she has three staff members that need to see students, etc. They are very clear that their number one priority is to provide services to our students. The Student Services Department is very thin and they are running on empty. They reach out to students in the evening, on the weekends and are unable to keep up with paperwork which is often done on their own time.

T. Johnston liked the idea of putting a FTE back in the general education part of the school but asked if we looked at any other models to replace that capacity in the Bridges Program. Is the \$85,000+ the only way? Is there any way to add more people into the general Special Education program?

M. DiStefano stated that he came from a district that had 2 social workers and believes there is definitely a need for the 1.0 FTE Psychologists.

T. Johnston thanked everyone for their presentation and for answering all their questions and asked if there were any edits to the proposed budget and general questions, comments or additional information and opened the floor to board members for comments.

M. Williams wanted to thank the Administration for the thoughtful presentation on the social worker. She feels that this is not a questionable need and stated that she would support the hiring of the Social Worker.

M. D'Agostino stated that he still has many budget questions. He supports the addition to the Bridges Program but believes any additional support to the Special Education department is helpful. He continued to say that the budget number is desirable, as you look at it but wanted to articulate a few things. M. D'Agostino also commented that he would like the doctorate stipend be removed from the Head of School compensation since we were unlikely to offer it in the first year to Dr. Pin's replacement. A discussion took place on debt service, health insurance, and heating oil.

C. Graziano questioned the text book fees and if we ever look to change certain text books. A. Staron advised that over the past few years, we've budget around \$30,000 but normal updates are in the vicinity of \$15,000 due to normal wear and tear of paperbacks, etc. They did look into other options a few times but there was nothing to change this year.

C. Graziano had a general questions about athletics and extra-curricular. As far as participation goes, she asked if the numbers are the same or have there been any changes to extra-curricular activities.

Dr. Pin advised she believes the students are going to need every sport and every extra-curricular activity when they do come back to school so there have been no changes in these stipends, other than contract increases.

K. O'Brien asked if there was transportation for athletes going to other schools for competitions, etc. Dr. Pin advised that it is broken out into athletic transportation. M. Santangeli advised the transportation prices will remain the same as what they were in 2018-19.

Dr. Pin advised that there are no significant changes to the staffing document and it would be provided once completed. She reiterated that there are no changes to the number of FTEs. She stated that the smallest class is Latin 3 because they are unable to combine that with any other Latin class. Other courses may be able to be combined, where possible.

M. Pampel commented that based on her experience this year and with the understanding that we may not have our full student participation before the fall, she questioned how we would be sure the class sizes stay within a significant cap to accommodate all students.

Dr. Pin answered that it is very hard to estimate how these numbers will change and they cannot hire new employees based on tentative numbers so this is a very hard question to answer at this time. C. Zachery stated that he would meet with Dr. Pin to discuss projected budget numbers and have an answer by the next regular board meeting.

M. D'Agostino stated typically, \$1.00 is placed in the Capital reserve fund which allow us at the end of the school year to transfer unspent funds into that line item. He did not see that in the proposed budget. C. Zachery commented that there is \$1.00 in line 930 which is listed as 'Fund Transfers' and confirmed that the \$1.00 is in there.

M. D'Agostino questioned the increased amount in the extended school year (ESY) and asked if this was to provide for more services due to enrollment?

M. DiStefano commented that the figures on additional students may not be the typical ESY students so they added some additional funds in there to offset anticipated additional students who may come aboard who need support.

T. Johnston asked if we could possibly get to a number by the end of the meeting.

M. D'Agostino suggested that we adjust the health insurance line. Possible to go to a 2% - 3% decrease in cost? Additionally, remove \$5,000 out of Administration – line 2410 for the Head of School doctorate stipend.

After further conversation, T. Johnston asked for confirmation on the acceptance of the proposed budget with the following changes:

- Keep SRO
- Agreed on addition of Custodian
- Agreed on addition of Social Worker
- Health Insurance increase of \$65,000
- Electricity increase of \$30,000
- Reduction of administrative doctoral stipend of \$5,000

C. Graziano asked what would else would need to be removed to get us from 1.18% to 1%.

C. Zachery advised that we would need to remove approximately \$48,000 over all. An increase of \$240,000 over the existing budget would get it to 1%.

T. Johnston thanked everyone in the Administration for attending and allowed them to leave.

C. Zachery advised that \$43,791 is the number to be reduced. It was agreed to remove some from the health insurance line and recheck. He stated that if he removes the \$65,000 increase in health insurance, \$21,209 for health care, this would bring it to an even 1%.

T. Johnston asked C. Zachery to rework the numbers so that they can agree on the bottom line with everything updated at the regular meeting on March 16, 2021. Also, he requested that C. Zachery advise where we are at on projected unexpected funds for next year in order to provide this information to the towns.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Dana Benson, 34 Pond Road, Easton – wanted to say he appreciated Mr. D’Agostino’s comments on the health care aspects and particularly the idea that the Bridge Program grew and while it does fluctuate, it is clear that a Social Worker is needed. However, he just hopes that the Social Worker has worked in a Bridge Program and has no union constraints so that if things change, he/she could be shifted over to work in the general school population. He questioned the basis for the estimate of \$100,000 per student cost. He asked if this was a hard number or where did it come from.

T. Johnston advised that he would respond to D. Benson with an email with the name and contact information of the correct individual who could answer this question. Mr. Benson thanked T. Johnston, the board and the Administration for all their hard work.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENT

M. D’Agostino thanked everyone for their thoughtfulness and patience.

K. O’Brien thanked the staff for all their hard work and for getting back to the public in a timely manner and keeping them informed with a lot of detail.

T. Johnston also thanked everyone for their hard work, while staying on late and getting us to a place where we are not cutting services or staff.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: Move to adjourn the Region 9 Budget Workshop regular meeting (M. D’Agostino, M. Pampel). Approved, 8-0.

The meeting of the Region 9 Board of Education Budget Workshop as adjourned at 11:15 p.m.

Submitted by

Todd Johnston, Chairman Region 9 Board of Education

Recorded by

Sharon Luciano