

REGION 9 BOARD OF EDUCATION
BUDGET WORKSHOP REGULAR MEETING
Joel Barlow High School Library Learning Commons
On YouTube

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March 14, 2024 - 7:00 p.m.

Minutes

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DEBORAH SZEGEDI TOWN CLERK EASTON CT

ATTENDANCE

Board Members: Johnston, Parkin, Thompson, Denny, Pampel, Stinson

Remote: O'Brien; Absent: Graziano

Administration: McKinnon, Almeida, Schemm, Kellogg, D'Agostino, Scrofani, Matz

Others: One member of public, and staff videographer

CALL TO ORDER

T. Johnston called the Region 9 Board of Education budget workshop regular meeting to order at 7:04 p.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Approval of minutes from February 27th, 2024, Region 9 Board of Education Budget Workshop passed by consent with no objections. Approved. 6-0-1. (Pampel abstained).

PUBLIC COMMENT

None

BOARD MEMBER COMMENT

J. Stinson congratulated Barlow Robotics on being selected as a first round play-off pick. T. Johnston also offered his congratulations. M.L. Pampel looks forward to a thoughtful planning process as STEM area is developed. K. Thompson said it's important that course offerings are developed in parallel path with STEM space, and that space is flexible to accommodate quickly changing engineering and technology fields. K. O'Brien thanked the Art Department and Administration for creating more flexibility in art course selection for next year's set of ninth graders and beyond. T. Johnston concurred and thanked the Administration for communicating to families and students about change.

DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: SUPERINTENDENT'S PROPOSED 2024-2025 REGION 9 OPERATING BUDGET

T. Johnston summarized the recent NEST project presentation to Easton Board of Finance and Region 9 Building Committee meeting. The Region 9 Building Committee Special Meeting included review of architectural diagrams; the Building Committee asked M. D'Agostino to go back to architect with some changes and request estimates for the building and wastewater. Architect's rounded estimates are \$1.5M for the building and \$300,000 for wastewater treatment, which in total exceeds current remaining bond funds \$1.5MM. T. Johnston requested additional funding from Easton Board of Finance, which declined providing additional funding from ARPA funds or other sources. T. Johnston outlined several possible options to self-fund shortfall, including from existing fundraising group (which intends to ask the Redding Board of Finance to match their offer), adding money to 2024-25 Region 9 Operating Budget, and allocating funds in Region 9 Capital Plan. T. Johnston noted that further discussion of the NEST project

will be at the upcoming Region 9 Finance & Operations Committee, including how to best communicate to community members to elicit input.

C. Parkin noted that if a capital expenditure is being considered, it should be added as an agenda item before or after discussion about the operating budget; C. Parkin asked under what circumstances the Region 9 Board of Education would contribute to the NEST project on an operating basis? T. Johnston answered that they could look at the project to determine which costs are not necessarily capital that could be paid out of the Operating budget; the general contractor will provide a more accurate budget estimate. Dr. McKinnon added there is \$1.5 million remaining in bond funds, and the current estimated project total is between \$1.5-1.8M, which includes wastewater treatment and contingency. There is currently \$600,000 in Capital Reserve, and an additional 2% could be added to Capital Reserve from the end of the year funds.

J. Johnston said it's important for the public to know that no cuts are required in the 2023-24 budget nor the 2024-25 budget to fund the project, as it could be funded from capital. C. Parkin expressed concern that adding funds to the 2024-25 Operating Plan budget could negatively impact approval of that budget; G. Denny agreed. T. Johnston reiterated that wastewater treatment requirements changed after project budget was approved. K. Thompson asked if wastewater or building was scheduled to begin first; G. Denny replied it was likely to be concurrent. T. Johnston summarized Board discussion by saying that excess costs should go against Capital in 2024-25, not the Operating Budget.

C. Parkin said that it's important to send all committee agendas to all Region 9 Board members in advance of when committees are meeting to help Regular meetings more efficiently.

Dr. McKinnon summarized proposed Barlow STEM Academy concepts, saying they are examining existing curriculum and considering new courses to develop programming and software development, engineering and design, and web digital and communications pathways at the same time while they also look at physical space. Classrooms H101, H102, and F104 are being reviewed for repurposing and renovation, in both the short and long-term. He noted that if funds are encumbered in the 2024-25 Operating Budget for this purpose, they can explore, analyze, and begin thinking about this project.

Motion: Move that Region 9 Board of Education approve a budget for the fiscal year ending June 30th, 2025 of \$25,387, 469, for an increase of 2.32%. (Parkin)

Motion amended to:

Motion: Move that Region 9 Board of Education adopt a budget for the fiscal year ending June 30th, 2025 of \$25,407,041 for an increase of 2.40%. (Parkin/Stinson)

Discussion ensued: T. Johnston said transparency is important regarding graduation costs. Director of Finance, Operations & Technology, S. Scrofani, said she will work with Administration to get crosscut of graduation expenses; Dr. Mario Almeida, Barlow Head of School and Assistant Superintendent, explained that WestConn was no longer an option, but that there may be opportunities in other locations in the future.

K. Thompson said there is more than \$70,000 in different line items for consulting and asked for more specificity regarding what those fees cover. Dr. Pierson Ugol, Assistant Superintendent for ER9, replied that one driver of that number is to revise their evaluation plan; the State released new guidelines and the District is working with a consulting group to revise and build the evaluation plan; Barlow's portion of those consulting fees is between \$8-9K; another line item is around Critical Thinking and Mathematics, a K-12 District initiative. K. Thompson asked about a line of \$50,000 allocated to curriculum; Dr. Pierson

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Ugol answered that it is to pay teachers at an hourly rate for curriculum revision work during the summer. K. Thompson said it would be helpful to understand which Strategic Priorities consultants are focused on, what their assignment and timing is; how their work will change 2024-25 curriculum; how it changed curriculum this year; what specific changes were made. Board and administrators agreed it's important to receive updates on what consultants and staff are doing; J. Stinson added that understanding consultants' work and ensuring that money is being well spent is important.

T. Johnston asked Director of Special Education, K. Matz, about decline in tuition and outplacement and what the confidence level is with current budget numbers given existing pipeline of Special Education students. K. Matz replied it is difficult to build a budget so early because Special Education student needs are specialized; she suggested creating a contingency to cover any additional outplacements. K. Matz recommended a \$150,000 contingency because Special Education tuition and transportation can be highly variable. Discussion ensued with S. Scrofani suggesting flat-funding health insurance and all agreeing to maintain a strong health insurance reserve.

S. Scrofani outlined and explained how they calculated Region 9 budget increases over past four years considering impact of debt service and noted that total budget growth would be approximately 5-6%, if debt servicing were removed. C. Parkin asked that Region 9 Board and Administration agree on methodology for tracking operating budget versus debt and track actual operating costs. T. Johnston agreed.

K. Thompson noted it would be helpful to see additional Academic Centers data, including unique number of students who went versus number of total visits; students referred versus self-referrals. Dr. Almeida said he will compile that data, as well as improve future data collection to better track and measure Academic Centers. K. O'Brien asked if administrators are seeing an overall impact of the Academic Centers on student performance. T. Johnston and C. Parkin agreed that Academic Centers would be discussed at a future meeting with additional data from the Administration, including impact of new AP course offerings. J. Stinson said the data could have budgetary impact regarding additional resources. Dr. McKinnon said he'd like to look deeper too to see if the number of visits correlates to change in grades for students, and make statistical changes in how they are collecting data to provide better correlation between Academic Centers and student achievement. Board members added that both student and teacher feedback and input is important in evaluating and optimizing Academic Centers.

T. Johnston asked how the Bridges Program is performing, and if program is being maintained or expanded to reduce costs in other areas. K. Matz and Dr. Almeida reported there is a robust mental health team in the building, which was expanded, that provides robust mental health support, including Bridge; success fluctuates. T. Johnston asked that Bridges student pipeline and feeder programs be examined for planning and budgeting purposes.

Board members discussed how to best make Google Budget Q&A document available to public, agreeing that it will be made public, redacting names; in future, it will be made clear to everyone submitting questions that their questions will be shared with the public.

Motion: Move that Region 9 Board of Education adopt a budget for the fiscal year ending June 30th, 2025 of \$25,407,041 for an increase of 2.40%. (Parkin/Stinson). Approved. 7-0. Unanimous.

Administration noted that budget apportionment by town is based on student population as of October 1st, 2023, which was an enrollment of 727 students. The Easton portion is based on 384 students, which is 52.82% and \$13,419,950, an increase of \$163, 217 vs. YAG. The Redding portion is based on 343 students, which is 47.18% and \$11,987,091, an increase of \$432,457 vs. YAG. Total approved Region 9 budget for 2024-2025 is \$25,407,041, an increase of \$595,674 vs. YAG.

T. Johnston said Region 9 Finance & Operations Committee meeting will stand next Tuesday, March 19, 5:30 p.m. at Joel Barlow High School and a chair will be elected; NEST Building Committee will meet in parallel.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

BOARD COMMENT

C. Parkin thanked the Administration for responses to questions. T. Johnston also thanked the Administration and noted how technology is making meetings more efficient. G. Denny thanked Cyndi DeMarco in Central Office for sending out notices and materials to all for meetings in advance.

ADJOURNMENT

T. Johnston looked for a motion to adjourn the meeting.

**Motion: Move that the Region 9 Board of Education meeting be adjourned. (Stinson/Thompson).
Approved. 7-0. Unanimous.**

The Region 9 Board of Education Budget Workshop was adjourned at 8:57 p.m.

Submitted by Kathy Thompson
Secretary, Region 9 Board of Education

Recorded by Liadan O'Connor